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the collected essays of
A. K. Ramanujan

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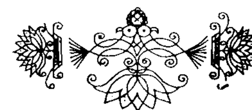
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The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan



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YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001

xford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

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Published in India by Oxford University Press, New Delhi

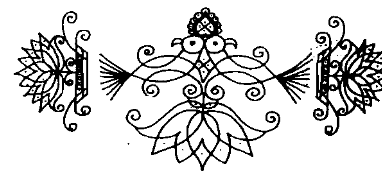
First published 1999
Second impression 2001
Oxford India Paperbacks 2004
Third impression 2006

Line illustration based on traditional South Indian *kolam* by Rukmini Krishnamurti

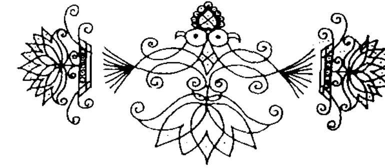
ISBN-13: 978-0-19-566896-4
ISBN-10: 0-19-566896-0

Typeset in Garamond by Guru Typograph Technology, New Delhi 110 045
Printed in India by Saurabh Printers Pvt. Ltd., Noida, UP
Published by Manzar Khan, Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001

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General Editor's Preface



In the last three or four years of his life, A.K. Ramanujan made a series of notes on the various essays on literature and culture that he had been writing for about four decades. He had delivered most of the essays in earlier forms as lectures to audiences in the United States, Europe, and India. He had also published early and late versions of many of them in scholarly journals and edited books since the 1950s. But some of them were still no more than outlines for talks or incomplete working drafts that needed substantial recasting and rewriting. The papers he left behind at his death on 13 July 1993 suggest that he intended to complete some of the unfinished pieces, revise the finished ones that were in print or in typescript, and bring together about thirty-five of them in a thematic arrangement for a possible volume of collected essays.

Late in 1993, Molly Daniels-Ramanujan invited a number of Ramanujan's colleagues, collaborators and friends to complete what he had contemplated. The present volume is a result of that collaboration, and comes as close as possible to the design he had revealed posthumously in his fragmentary notes. Wendy Doniger reviewed the material for Section I, 'General Essays on Literature and Culture', wrote a short introduction to it, and recommended other pieces for inclusion in the book. John Carman wrote an introduction to the essays on *bhakti* in Section III, 'Essays on *Bhakti* and Modern Poetry', while Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes selected, re-arranged and introduced the contents of Section IV, 'Essays on Folklore'. Milton Singer, working independently, and Edward Dimock and Krishna Ramanujan, working together, produced two different accounts of Ramanujan's career that serve as a composite introduction to his writing and as tributes to his memory. As the general editor of the book, I coordinated the work of these colleagues, assembled all the essays, prepared the editorial matter, revised the notes and references for

uniformity of style, and also provided the introduction to Section II, 'Essays on Classical Literatures'.

This volume now contains thirty essays altogether, six each on general aspects of Indian literature and culture, classical literatures, and the literatures of the *bhakti* movement and the modern period, and twelve on the study of Indian folklore. It excludes the essays that are already famous as part of Ramanujan's books in print: the Afterwords to *The Interior Landscape* (1967), U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (1976), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), and *Poems of Love and War* (1985), and the Introductions to *Speaking of Śiva* (1973) and *Folktales from India* (1992). The volume also excludes the lecture-texts and interview-transcripts that are forthcoming in *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, and the drafts and outlines of several lectures and essays on topics in Indian linguistics that are too technical to be of interest to general readers. This edition of his *Collected Essays* thus brings together all the finished scholarly pieces that Ramanujan left behind in typescript or in print, that are not available in his other book-length works, and that he had contemplated including in such a volume.

Of the essays that have appeared in print earlier, we have reproduced the last published versions, incorporating all the further changes that Ramanujan had marked—in keeping with a lifelong habit—on his file-copies of the publications. In the case of the four essays that were not published in his lifetime, we have closely followed the last typescript versions in his files, silently correcting obvious typographical errors. For the essays that contain notes and references, we have modified the styles of annotation and citation used in our copy-texts for consistency, and have consolidated all the notes and references at the end of this volume for the reader's convenience. As the general editor, I have added clearly designated notes in brackets, identifying the copy-texts of the essays and commenting briefly, when necessary, on their textual 'evolution'. Ramanujan often published an essay many years after he had first drafted or delivered it as a lecture, and since the complex sequence in which these pieces were written, revised and first published affects our response to them and to him now, I have constructed a general chronology of his books and essays at the end of this volume. My observations in the chronology may help us decipher how Ramanujan's mind revolved around certain themes over a long period of time, how it moved from one set of interests or switched from one angle of vision to another, and how it circled back to older concerns after thinking through crucial matters of method and interpretation in the light of his more recent discoveries.

Repetition and variation were persistent features of Ramanujan's style as a thinker, teacher, poet, and essayist. He embraced strong ideas passionately and held on to them for great lengths of time (until he could replace them with other powerful ideas), even as he constantly sought out new concepts, new locations, new insights. When he found an intellectual position that sustained all his interests—such as Anglo-American New Criticism in the 1950s, French structuralism, Russian formalism and German critical theory in the 1960s and 1970s, and some aspects of French deconstruction and American and Indian feminism in the 1980s—he used it as vigorously and comprehensively as possible to elucidate many different texts, genres, and themes. Whenever he discovered the shortcomings of a particular method or perspective (as he did with the structuralist logic of binary oppositions in the early 1980s, for example), he approached his material all over again with a new understanding of their values and meanings. But just as he rarely adopted others' theories and principles without important modifications of his own, he rarely repeated himself without ringing changes, or producing significant variations, on what he had thought and said earlier. His explications of Indian literature and culture thus were always in motion, constantly energising familiar patterns with unexpected new alignments and rearrangements.

The combination of movement and recurrence that gives a critical edge to the essays in this volume is linked closely to the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary dimensions of Ramanujan's scholarship. He approached his topic, no matter what it was, with instruments of analysis from several different disciplines, and the arguments he developed could not be reduced to the standard arguments in any one of them. His explications of poems, for example, drew as much on the protocols of formalist literary criticism as on the contextual concerns of ethnography, history, and folklore studies, while his explanations of social codes depended equally on social theory, linguistics, poetics, and comparative cultural studies. He negotiated the difficult terrain of multiple, intersecting, and sometimes potentially conflicting disciplines by traversing a helix-like path through them, circling around a central axis but never returning to exactly the same position.

Ramanujan moved effortlessly through different disciplines and different types of material (poems, stories, forms, conventions, religions, histories, cultures) by fashioning a distinctive scholarly style. He designed and wrote his essays so that they would work upon his readers as much by allusion, echo, and suggestion, as by the force of explicit

argument. While each piece was structured simply, so that it never strayed far from its stated theme, it was also surrounded by a field of multiple resonances, leading the reader outward in several directions at once. This 'ripple effect' was a function of Ramanujan's poetic style as a writer of critical prose, in which wit, irony, humour and polyphony enabled him to condense several perspectives or insights into a few aphoristic phrases. It was also the result of his pursuit of obliqueness or indirection—the classical Sanskrit device of *vakrokti*, 'crooked speech'—under the mask of lightness and simplicity. Ramanujan, in fact, constructed an essay much like a poem, which shows more than it tells, suggests more than it reveals, and echoes more than it acknowledges.

Ramanujan succeeded in combining direct topicalisation with indirect articulation because he thought and wrote intertextually. His essays are full of explicit and implicit quotations, and many of them reproduce large portions of other texts, often whole poems and even entire stories. In this proliferation of quoted material, Ramanujan's own commentary frequently takes a back seat, running like a tour-guide's voice in the background, while the objects he discusses keep us fascinated in the foreground. This sort of apparently self-effacing critical intertextuality was central to his scholarly practice because he believed that literary and cultural texts can 'speak for themselves', and speak especially effectively when they are unfamiliar or have been cunningly 'defamiliarised'. For him, the ideal critical essay was the one proposed by Walter Benjamin, where a scholar-critic ought to hide behind 'a phalanx of quotations which, like highwaymen, would ambush the passing reader and rob him of his convictions.' Particularly in the second half of his career, Ramanujan constructed an essay as an 'anthology of quotations', a phrase that also echoes Jacques Derrida's notion of a text as a 'tissue of citations'. Any one of the later critical pieces he wrote was therefore likely to be an 'anthological essay', the text of which emerged out of a series of pre-texts, meta-texts, counter-texts, and inter-texts interacting variously with each other.

This book would not have been possible without Molly Daniels-Ramanujan's generosity and patience, and without the promptness and care with which Stuart Blackburn, John Carman, Edward Dimock, Wendy Doniger, Alan Dundes, Krishna Ramanujan, and Milton Singer contributed their expertise at short notice. We regret that Girish Karnad could not join us because of the distances that still separate the United States and India; and that V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman were unable to add their special skills to this editorial effort. We record with deep

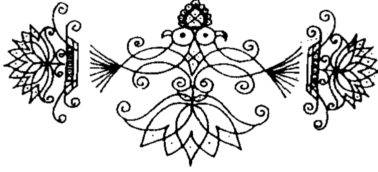
sorrow that our senior-most colleague, Milton Singer, passed away at his home in Chicago on 4 December 1994, shortly after revising his tribute to Ramanujan for this volume.

I would like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to the editors and publishers who granted permission to reprint many of these essays; to the University of Oklahoma and its Department of English for their research support; and to Michelle Stie for her diligence and enthusiasm as my research assistant in 1994–95. Molly Daniels-Ramanujan and I owe many thanks to James Nye, South Asia Bibliographer, and William Alspaugh, both at the Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, for their invaluable bibliographical and archival help. Our thanks also to Anuradha Roy and Rukun Advani at Oxford University Press, Delhi, for their tact and patience throughout, their close attention to detail and their skilful overall management of not only this project but also the other books to which it is related: *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (1994), which I co-edited with Ramanujan; Ramanujan's *Collected Poems* (1995); and his forthcoming *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*.

Norman, Oklahoma
September 1998

VINAY DHARWADKER

Introduction: Two Tributes to A.K. Ramanujan



I

A.K. Ramanujan, almost universally known to his associates as Raman, was for many years my respected and always stimulating colleague and friend at the University of Chicago. The essays collected here testify to many themes of that relationship. Needless to say, his sudden passing in 1993 stunned and deprived us all.

I happened to be the Secretary of the Committee on Southern Asian Studies (COSAS) when he first came to the University of Chicago in 1961. At that time, the present Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations did not exist; COSAS was his first home at the University. As with J.A.B. van Buitenen, a Sanskritist, and Edward C. Dimock, Jr., a specialist in the Bengali language and its literature, both of whom had arrived a couple of years earlier, Raman was given a departmental affiliation (in Linguistics) while he became active in COSAS. In this respect, the South Asia language and literature 'juniors' differed from their counterparts in Anthropology (e.g., Bernard Cohn, Clifford Geertz, McKim Marriott), History (Stephen Hay), and Political Science (Myron Weiner) who were directly appointed to their respective departments. Both kinds of 'juniors', however, soon became active in the programme of teaching and research about South and Southeast Asia; to develop and co-ordinate which COSAS had been organised in 1955.

The unanticipated consequence of this situation was that the 'juniors', with their recent specialised degrees in their fields, soon became the mentors of those who had helped to bring them to Chicago. Among these 'elders' were George Bobrinskoy in Sanskrit, Robert Crane and Donald

Lach in History, Fred Eggan in Anthropology, Edward Shils in Sociology and Social Thought, and myself in Social Sciences and Anthropology.

Another and more important consequence was that the community of scholars which began to emerge as both 'juniors' and 'elders' talked with one another across departmental, divisional and status boundaries. In 1956, when the College of the University inaugurated three full-year introductions to the civilisations of China, Islam and India, with the assistance of a three-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the conversations of COSAS's community of scholars, including Raman a few years later, became available to undergraduates.

According to all accounts of Raman's classes and lectures at which versions of some of these essays were presented, confirmed by my own personal observations, the experience was memorable. Beginning often with a provocative question, such as 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?', Raman would proceed to present such a diversity of texts and contexts, oral and written tales, poems, interviews and conversations, that the answer to the question would become inescapable, not as a dogmatic assertion, but as an invitation to look at the posed question from a fresh perspective.

My personal conversations with Raman also often turned on some of the questions raised in these essays. These discussions may not have been typical of those he had with other colleagues, yet his comments were so surprising that I may be forgiven for repeating several.

India's many languages were a frequent subject of our conversations. If I mentioned evidence for India's linguistic diversity from personal observations or reading, he would not only add illustrations from his own personal household (two mother tongues and two father tongues, as in 'Telling Tales'), but would also counter with examples from the United States. When I once asked him which language in the USA he would consider as a second language after English, he immediately answered, 'Spanish'.

When we compared Western and Indian conceptions of the self, Raman recalled that while he was still at school in Mysore, he noticed a parallel between the *Gita* and Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' in their conception of 'a double self', as actor and as object. To my question whether Whitman's line 'I am a cosmos' has a parallel in India, he referred me to his translation of a poem by the ninth-century saint, Nammāḻvār, the opening poem in *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981).

Raman's essay 'Towards an Anthology of City Images' shows that he

was aware that the University of Chicago's approach to language and area studies owed something to Robert Redfield's proposal to take the great and little traditions of indigenous civilizations as units of study. Although Raman never met Redfield, the contrast between ancient Puhar and Madurai in this essay evokes Redfield's contrast between a colonial port city and a sacred capital city, as well as the analogous contrast between modern Madras [Chennai] and modern Madurai.

Because this collection of essays embodies such a wide range of experience and creative reflections, it will continue to open many windows on India's literatures and cultures, and to remind us of the talented poet, translator, folklorist, linguist and friend it was our privilege to know.

MILTON B. SINGER

II

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, affectionately called Raman by friends, was known widely as a great modern poet in India. In America, through his excellent translations, he made classical Tamil and Kannada poetry accessible to Westerners. He had an extremely retentive and diversely curious mind and he loved his work. He was never without a book. For the vast majority of his life, he claimed to have read at least 100 pages every day. Without reference to himself, he thought brilliant Indians had mental capabilities of a peculiar range. But Ramanujan himself possessed an amazing mental wizardry in his depth and diversity as a scholar, his creativity as a poet, his unusual ability to relate particulars to universals, his knack for seeing cogent connections in disparate things. It was perhaps more than wit and modesty that brought forth his oft-quoted line about being 'the hyphen in Indian-American'. His unique talents and experience gave him the perspective to fuse the Indian culture embedded in his heart with the Western culture in which he transplanted himself.

Born on 16 March 1929, into a Tamil brahman family in Karnataka, South India, Ramanujan's upbringing provided the foundation on which he later built an impressive body of work. In the first place, he was raised in a tri-lingual environment. When he spoke to his father on the second-floor study of the family's three-storey house in Mysore city, he used English. Downstairs, with his mother in the kitchen, Tamil was spoken. And on the streets outside, he communicated in Kannada.

Furthermore, education was a fundamental requirement of his brahman upbringing. His father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswami, a professor of mathematics at Mysore University and an astronomer, had a study

crammed with books in English, Kannada, and Sanskrit. The house was alive with ideas. On summer nights, the children gathered on the third-floor terrace while their father pointed out and explained the constellations. Sometimes at dinner, the children listened intently as their father translated for their mother the stories of Shakespeare and other Western classics into Tamil.

Ramanujan's mother was an orthodox brahman woman of her time, limited by custom in the scope of her movement and control, in this way a typical housewife. Though she was no intellectual practitioner, she was neither typical nor limited in her learning and imagination. She was widely read in Tamil and Kannada, and comfortable in the world of ideas.

These were the parents who gave Ramanujan the telling metaphor of father language and mother tongue that enlightens much of the analysis found in the essays of this book. By the time his father died, when Ramanujan was only twenty, the older man had already helped shape his son's devotion to an intellectual life. Ramanujan's parents were with him all his life. He was both embarrassed and amused by the cover of his second book of poetry, *Relations* (1971), which showed him full-face, with his parents literally on his mind—their portrait was superimposed on the middle of his forehead. The publishers agreed to remove the picture, but then, with his own brand of light-hearted self-mockery, Ramanujan considered that the remaining prospect, that of a cover filled by his own naked face, was an even worse alternative.

As a youth, Ramanujan was perplexed by his father's seemingly paradoxical belief in both astrology and astronomy: how could one man blend the rational and irrational in this way? Curiously, Ramanujan chose magic as his first artistic endeavour. While in his teens, he had the neighbourhood tailor fashion him a coat fitted with hidden pockets and elastic bands in which he concealed rabbits and bouquets of flowers. With added *accoutrements* of top-hat and wand he performed for local schools, women's groups, and social clubs. The desire to be a magician was perhaps a strange use of the insight he gained from his father's quirky belief in the irrational. Where magic shows are concerned, the interplay between performer and audience requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience and a rational, technical skill on the part of the magician. Ramanujan was always to be decidedly rational, too rational to ascribe to the religion he was raised in, or to believe in astrology. But more than that, we can see here an early love of performance. Later in life, as a lecturer, Ramanujan was magician-like; he enjoyed surprising an audience with brilliant unforeseen conclusions, he could pull from the

pockets of his mind a bewildering array of accumulated knowledge. Still, he was not so unlike his father: he had his own way of blending paradoxes between the East and the West, between seemingly unrelated things. In this way, we can see how even a partial acceptance of his father gave him an invaluable open-mindedness.

Ramanujan had always a wide variety of interests. His father, in fact, after browsing through his son's shelves filled with literature, philosophy, anthropology and zoology, wryly termed him 'intellectually promiscuous'. It was a promiscuity Ramanujan cultivated all his life. By the time of his death in 1993, he was intensely interested in all printed matter—pulp fiction and trash novels (he loved a good mystery novel), folklore and technical linguistics.

At seventeen, a subtly serendipitous event occurred: he overslept for a history final and failed. He did not graduate that year with his class, and his self-esteem was so low he initially locked himself in his room and vowed never to come out. But that year would later prove to be one of the most important of his life. He passed the extra time by writing his first poems, stories and radio plays. His radio plays were performed by local groups, and on the days they were broadcast he monopolised the one wireless in the house. He read extensively, took long walks with his friends through the beautiful grounds of the palace of the Maharajah of Mysore and talked literature; or he and a few friends would sit in a coffee house, share a cup of coffee and discuss the effects of soliloquy in drama.

In college, Ramanujan majored in science in his first year, but his father, who thought him 'not mathematically minded', literally took him by the hand to the Registrar's office and changed his major from science to English. Ramanujan received a BA with honours in English Literature from Mysore University in 1949. That same year, he took a job teaching English in Kerala. His father went with him to the train station. It was the last time they would see each other. Krishnaswami died of a heart attack in 1950. Shortly afterwards, Ramanujan moved to another teaching position in Dharwar, Karnataka. Even in those early days he was developing a local reputation as a brilliant lecturer. People travelled miles to take his classes.

His early love was Shakespeare and he never lost it. But in 1957 a new love for linguistics added to his interests. He enrolled at the Deccan College in Poona (as it was then known), in a programme supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and staffed by some of the most eminent linguists in India, as well as specialists from the US and Europe. In 1958, he

came to America on a Fullbright grant, to continue in linguistics at Indiana University. His teachers included Voegelin, Householder, and Sebeok. With a dissertation on the generative grammar of Kannada, he received a Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1963.

At Indiana, as in India, Ramanujan's brilliant mind and gentle demeanour drew attention from many, including the linguist William Bright. In the early 1960s, the South Asian Languages programme at the University of Chicago, nurtured by Milton Singer, was expanding to include Dravidian languages. A replacement was needed for Ronald Asher, who was returning to the UK, and Bright suggested Ramanujan. Ramanujan agreed to teach for the summer of 1961, protesting modestly that he did not consider Tamil to be his major competence. It was a fortuitous try, for as he taught language and linguistics his love of literature led him to the classical Tamil anthologies.

His first major work of translation, *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967), was a foretaste of his trademark combination of beautiful poetry and careful, incisive scholarship. This collection demonstrated his ability to stay extremely loyal to the Indian qualities of the literature and still make it clear and fascinating to Westerners. His first book of original poetry, *The Striders* (1966), shared the delicacy, subtlety, and precision of the translated Tamil poems. Within his considerable career, Ramanujan translated and analysed the texts and traditions of the *vīraśaivas* of Kannada (*Speaking of Śiva* [1973]) and the *ālvārs* of Tamil (*Hymns for the Drowning* [1981]). When he died, he was working with John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan on a more definitive version of those classical Tamil poems.

His methodology was influenced by de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Freud, Jung, Chomsky, and Derrida, but in the way he had of blending the disparate, of use as a result of necessity, he was not bound by any one of them. His thought was never doctrinaire, for he believed strongly that doctrines blinded the observer to the text.

All of his work contains a keen attention to detail; his poet's eye focused on particulars in the world around him. He always kept a little pad of paper or a stack of index cards in the pocket of his jacket, and when a thought appealed to him, or when he observed something of special interest, he made a note of it. He narrowed in on the details which related to the ideas most germane to his character. He had the gift of connecting the *minutiae* of life and the world to larger learned concepts. *The Interior Landscape* (1967) opens with vast spaces:

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,

and the brief poem ends with the microscopic:

. . . the flowers of the *kuṟiñci*
that has such black stalks.

Still, Ramanujan was a craftsman who was never satisfied with merely the observed. He shaped and polished each poem and essay, cutting facets until the result approached the directness and clarity for which he strove. He is said to have drafted certain poems over many years, up to forty times before he felt they were done.

The editorial obituary in *The Times of India* described Ramanujan as 'full of irresolutions and ancestral fears'. He was an internally complicated man whose identity existed outside of himself. He made subjective the world around him. At the same time, in his poetry, he had the depth to transcend and recognise his own consciousness. Ramanujan speaks to the irresolutions and questions of self-identity in his poem 'Self-Portrait':

I resemble everyone
but myself
and sometimes see in shop-windows
    despite the well-known laws
    of optics
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

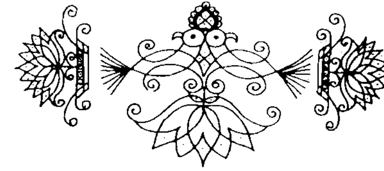
Ramanujan died on 13 July 1993, with many honours to his name. Most prominent among them were the Padma Shri award of the Government of India, a MacArthur Fellowship, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was sought after, all over the world. As his friend and colleague Wendy Doniger has said, no one who has been exposed to the man or to his work will ever look at India—or many other things—in the same way again.

EDWARD C. DIMMOCK, JR., AND
KRISHNA RAMANUJAN

I

General Essays on Literature and Culture

Introduction by Wendy Doniger



A.K. Ramanujan was one of those thinkers, like Freud (whom he greatly, though not uncritically, admired), who so transform our way of looking at a subject that we are in danger of undervaluing their contribution, since we have come to take for granted precisely what they taught us, as we view the subject through their eyes. At a time when the American Indological establishment regarded native Indian scholars merely as sources of information about languages and texts, like the raw fibres that were taken from India to be processed in British mills, but seldom as scholars who might have their own ideas about how to process those texts, Raman taught them all how to weave a theory, a folktale, a poem, a book. Long before it was politically respectable, let alone politically correct, to study the works of women, or of 'illiterate' peasants, Raman valued their poetry and their stories, their counter-systems, as he taught us to call them. At a time when Indian literature meant Sanskrit, and Sanskrit meant Greek and Latin, Raman arrived in Chicago to join Edward C. Dimock and the other 'founding fathers' in proclaiming to the world the relevance of Tamil and Bengali and the other mother tongues. Without so much as raising his gentle voice, he blazed a great path through the centre of Indological studies. He gave us so many new paradigms that no Indologist can now think about India without thinking through his thoughts.

The essays in this collection bring together many of these paradigmatic Ramanujan paradigms. 'Where Mirrors Are Windows' sets out the principle of self-reflexivity in ways that clarify and transcend the deconstructionists' approach to this important topic. 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?' sets out the paradigm of stressing different words in a question to ask multiple questions, which in turn establishes a paradigm for the question of cultural specificity, another central general issue in our

time; it also, in passing, answers its question(s) for the specific case of India. His essay on 'Food for Thought' makes sense of a question raised, in our time, by Mary Douglas, and subsequently asked, and pondered, by many other anthropologists and historians of religion; Ramanujan's essay brings great clarity to this often hypertrophied discussion. Other essays throughout this collection present us with several ideas that, though developed by Ramanujan with a specific focus on India, have been taken out of context by other scholars to apply to other cultures; one of these is, appropriately, the idea of the context-sensitivity of *dharma*. Other ideas of this sort, that have proved able, like good wines, to 'travel', include the formulation of the contrast between goddesses of the breast and goddesses of the tooth, intertextuality, the permeable membrane, mother tongues and father languages.

There is an irony in the way that Ramanujan, who always insisted on the essential individuality not only of Indian genres but of each specific telling of each version of each tale, has himself proved to be an inspiration for so many cross-cultural enterprises. But this is not altogether inappropriate. Despite his insistence on the Indianness of Indian cultural forms, Raman could also tell you the Stith-Thompson motif to which any of his stories corresponded, and he was interested in testing Freudian paradigms that extended beyond the bounds of any single culture. He would never have explicitly asked the question, 'Is there a human way of thinking?', but his collected work certainly poses this question, and offers the quintessential Ramanujan answer: yes, and no.

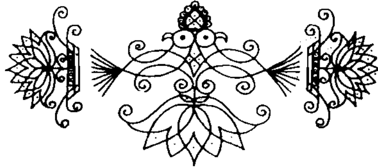
This tension between the specifically Indian and the more generally human characterised all of his work and made it great. His typically witty, self-deprecating, and much-quoted remark about being the hyphen in 'Indo-American' offers too simple a key to his unique genius as an Indologist. He did indeed combine the very best of both worlds: he was the consummate insider in India, and his Indian sensitivity and experience lent his work a freshness, a depth, and a solidity that those of us who first met India on the printed page could only envy. But here in America, he was the consummate participant-observer, translating his Indian insights for us not merely into English but into the thought-systems of Chomsky, de Saussure, Derrida, Stith-Thompson, Freud. And, passing through this permeable membrane in the other direction, he inaugurated a project in India to train young Indian folklorists to collect Indian stories—with the discipline that he had learned in Bloomington, years ago, with his old friend Alan Dundes.

For Raman himself, the mother tongue, Kannada or Tamil, the *akam*

language, the intimate language, was the language of his own mother. Proudly he brought her, as well as her words, into his new world, to visit him here in Chicago; she arrived at O'Hare airport, having eaten nothing since leaving her home, with no luggage, carrying one paper bag in which she had one cotton sari and blouse to wear while she washed her other cotton sari and blouse, which she was wearing. His learned father always represented to him the more distant languages, the ***puṟam*** languages, Sanskrit and English. Mother and father stare proudly at us from that amazing photograph on the cover of Raman's second volume of poems, *Relations* (1971): he sitting, she standing, towering above him, both of them firmly embedded in the head of Ramanujan.

This double mental life yielded the brilliant academic insights collected in this volume. Performing his great intellectual trapeze act suspended, without a net, between two worlds, Raman sometimes appeared to be free of any cultural gravity, like Triśaṅku, suspended for eternity between earth and heaven, or like the man in the folktale who wanders to another world and returns home to find that everyone has aged when he has not, or that he has aged when they have not. The words of Chateaubriand cited by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) seem to me to describe Raman: 'Every man carries within him a world which is composed of all that he has seen and loved, and to which he constantly returns, even when he is travelling through, and seems to be living in, some different world' (44). Raman once remarked to David Tracy, our colleague at the University of Chicago, that we can no longer live, like the nineteenth-century British, simultaneously in India and Europe, which they had made into one place by imposing one of their worlds on the other. Now, Raman said, Salman Rushdie and Naipaul express what all of us will soon become: the two places are truly different, and we are at home in neither. This remarkable collection of essays seems to me to prove the contrary: that he was at home in both, and illuminated both for those of us who are condemned to live in one or the other.

Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections



A snake-charmer and his noseless wife,
snake in hand, walk carefully
trying to read omens
for a son's wedding,

but they meet head-on
a noseless woman
and her snake-charming husband,
and cry 'The omens are bad!'

His own wife has no nose;
there's snake in his hand.
What shall I call such fools
who do not know themselves
and see only the others,

O Lord
of the meeting
rivers!

Basavaṇṇa (Ramanujan 1973, 74)

One day when the children were playing, they reported to Yaśodā, 'Kṛṣṇa has eaten dirt.' Yaśodā took Kṛṣṇa by the hand and scolded him and said, 'You naughty boy, why have you eaten dirt?' 'I haven't,' said Kṛṣṇa. 'All the boys are lying. If you believe them instead of me, look at my mouth yourself.' 'Then open up,' she said to the god, who had in sport taken the form of a human child; and he opened his mouth.

Then she saw in his mouth the whole universe, with the far corners of the sky, and the wind, and lightning, and the orb of the earth with its mountains and

oceans, and the moon and stars, and space itself; and she saw her own village and herself. She became frightened and confused, thinking, 'Is this a dream or an illusion fabricated by God? Or is it a delusion in my own mind? For God's power of delusion inspires in me such false beliefs as, "I exist," "This is my husband," "This is my son."

Bhāgavata Purāṇa (O'Flaherty 1975, 220–1; modified)

INTRODUCTION

One way of defining diversity for India is to say what the Irishman is said to have said about trousers. When asked whether trousers were singular or plural, he said, 'Singular at the top and plural at the bottom.' This is the view espoused by people who believe that Indian traditions are organised as a pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition (in the singular) and many local Little Traditions (in the plural). Older Indian notions of *mārga* and *deśi* and modern Indian politicians' rhetoric about unity in diversity fall in line with the same position. The official Indian literary academy, the Sahitya Akademi, has the motto, 'Indian literature is one but written in many languages.' I, for one, would prefer the plural, 'Indian literatures', and would wonder if something would remain the same if it is written in several languages, knowing as I do that even in the same language, 'a change of style is a change of subject,' as Wallace Stevens would say.

Another way of talking about a culture like the Indian is through the analogy of a hologram—that is to say that any section is a cross-section, any piece of it is a true representation of the whole, as any cell of the body is supposed to be a true sample of the whole body. Linguists and anthropologists, especially structuralists in general, have operated on this assumption for a while. To them, any native speaker contains the whole of his language; any informant, any myth or ritual, contains the whole of the culture. To study his or its grammar is to study the grammar of the whole language or culture. Such a holographic view implies uniform texture, the replication of one structure in all systems of a culture, without negations, warps or discontinuities and with no pockets in space or time. It is a very attractive view, especially to people in a hurry, and I have myself held it for many years, though somewhat uneasily. In this view, the classics of Indian civilization, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Purāṇas*, as well as the folklore, the so-called Little (or as we say in India, the 'little little') Traditions, are all of one piece. At worst, the latter are garbled versions of the former, simplified for or by the little man. The Great Traditions for the elite, and the little Little Traditions for the little little folks,

that is, semi- or illiterate, rural, regional people who are competent only in a mother tongue—but basically there is no difference in kind, only in quality. At its best, it is a form of monism; at its worst, it is a form of cultural imperialism, an upstairs/downstairs view of India.

I would like to suggest the obvious: that cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organised through at least two principles, (*a*) context-sensitivity and (*b*) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. What we call brahmanism, *bhakti* traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, *tantra*, tribal traditions and folklore, and lastly, modernity itself, are the most prominent of these systems. They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions, they invert, subvert, and convert their neighbours. Furthermore, each of these terms, like what we call India itself, is 'a verbal tent with three-ring circuses' going on inside them. Further dialogic divisions are continuously in progress. They look like single entities, like neat little tents, only from a distance.

Reflexivity takes many forms: awareness of self and other, mirroring, distorted mirroring, parody, family resemblances and rebels, dialectic, antistructure, utopias and dystopias, the many ironies connected with these responses, and so on. In this paper on Indian literary texts and their relations to each other ('intertextuality', if you will), I will concentrate on three related kinds of reflexivity. I shall call them (1) *responsive*, where text A responds to text B in ways that define both A and B; (2) *reflexive*, where text A reflects on text B, relates itself to it directly or inversely; (3) *self-reflexive*, where a text reflects on itself or its kind. The parts or texts in relation 1 may be called co-texts, in 2, countertexts, and in 3, metatexts. We could also speak of pretexts, intertexts, subtexts, and so on. The vast variety of Indian literature, oral and written, over the centuries, in hundreds of languages and dialects, offers an intricate but open network of such relations, producing families of texts as well as texts that are utterly individual in their effect, detail, and temporal/regional niches. But these relations are perceived by native commentators and by readers. To them, texts do not come in historical stages but form 'a simultaneous order', where every new text within a series confirms yet alters the whole order ever so slightly, and not always so slightly. T.S. Eliot spoke of a simultaneous order for European literature, but the phrase applies even more strongly to Indian literary traditions, especially until the nineteenth century.[1] Modernity disrupted the whole tradition of reflexivity with new notions of originality and the autonomy of single works. Among other

things, the printing press radically altered the relation of audience to author and of author to work, and it bifurcated the present and the past so that the pastness of the past is more keenly felt than the presence of the past. Reflexive elements may occur in various sizes: one part of the text may reflect on another part; one text may reflect on another; a whole tradition may invert, negate, rework, and revalue another. Where cultures (like the 'Indian') are stratified yet interconnected, where the different communities communicate but do not commune, the texts of one stratum tend to reflect on those of another: encompassment, mimicry, criticism and conflict, and other power relations are expressed by such reflexivities. Self-conscious contrasts and reversals also mark off and individuate the groups—especially if they are closely related, like twins. Closely related sects, like the *teṅkalai* (southern) and *vaṭakalai* (northern) sects of Tamil Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, serve even food in different orders, and self-consciously list 'eighteen differences' (Govindacarya 1910).

The rather grossly conceived Great Tradition and Little Traditions are only two such moieties: as suggested earlier, *bhakti*, *tantra*, and other countertraditions, as well as Buddhism, Jainism, and, for later times, Islam and Christianity, should be included in this web of intertextuality. I shall draw here only on earlier Indian literatures for my instances. Stereotypes, foreign views, and native self-images on the part of some groups all tend to regard one part (say, the brahmanical texts or folklore) as the original, and the rest as variations, derivatives, aberrations, so we tend to get monolithic conceptions. But the civilisation, if it can be described at all, has to be described in terms of all these dynamic interrelations between different traditions, their texts, ideologies, social arrangements, and so forth. Reflexivities are crucial to the understanding of both the order and diversity, the openness and the closures, of this civilisation. One may sometimes feel that 'mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show'.[2] Such an anthology can be made about other aspects of the culture, like ritual, philosophy, food and sociolinguistic patterns, or across them (see chap. 4, 'Food for Thought', below). Let me begin with small-scale examples and move to larger ones.

Languages like Tamil have self-reflexive and benefactive elements in their grammatical/lexical systems.

'A killed B': *A B-ai kolai ceytāṇ*.
'A killed himself': *A taṟkolai ceytukoṇṭāṇ* (reflexive).
'A beat B': *A B-ai aṭittāṉ*.
'A beat himself': *A taṉṉaittāṉē aṭittukoṇṭāṉ* (reflexive).

Tamil has reflexive elements not only in nouns (*taṟ-kolai*: sui-cide, self-murder) but in verbs as well. In *ceytāṉ* and *ceytukoṇṭāṉ*, the latter (adverbial participle + *koḷ* forms) is reflexive. In fact, many verbs can be made reflexive or benefactive, orienting the action toward the self or the other, by the addition of auxiliaries like *koḷ* or *koḍu* (literally, 'take' or 'give'):

> *collikkoṇṭāṉ*: he said to himself, or he said on his own behalf (reflexive).
> *collikkoṭuttāṉ*: he said for the sake of another, meaning 'taught' (benefactive).

Similarly, many verbs have forms that convert what is originally self-regarding to other-regarding, transitive, or causative forms:

> *varuntiṉāṉ*: he grieved (by himself).
> *varuttiṉāṉ*: he made (someone) grieve.
> *cantōṣppaṭṭāṉ*: he felt happy.
> *cantōṣappaṭuttiṉāṉ*: he made (someone) feel happy.

Such actor-oriented and other-oriented forms occur all over the verbal system and its semantics (Fedson 1981).

I am wary of leaping from linguistic structures to other cultural structures; such leaps may be no more than leaps of faith. Yet, the above reflexive/benefactive opposition does call to mind what I consider to be a central pair of terms in Tamil poetry and poetics: *akam* and *puṟam*.[3] In the language of the poems and the commentaries, they signify generally 'interior' and 'exterior', as they denote a concentric series of paired meanings according to context, each larger in scope than the other. Each set is a 'responsive' correlate of the other. Here is a set of such meanings:

Akam	*Puṟam*
1. interior	exterior
2. heart, mind	body surfaces and extremities, e.g. back, side, arms
3. self	others
4. kin	non-kin
5. house, family	houseyard, field
6. inland, settlement	areas far from dense human habitation, e.g. jungle, desert
7. earth	farthest ocean
8. love poems—no names of places or persons	poetry about war and other than [well-matched] love, a 'public' poetry, with names of real people and places
9. Codes of conduct appropriate to *akam*	Codes of conduct appropriate to *puṟam*

(Ramanujan 1985, 262)

As I have written elsewhere at some length about this important and complex pair of terms, I shall concentrate here only on its relevance to our present theme (Ramanujan 1985, 229–97). Here are two brief examples of *akam* and *puṟam* poems:

WHAT HE SAID IN THE DESERT

In this long summer wilderness
  seized and devoured by wildfire,

if I should shut my eyes
  even a wink,

I see
  dead of night, a tall house
  in a cool yard, and the girl

with freckles
  like *kino* flowers,

hair flowing as with honey,
  her skin a young mango leaf.

Ōtalāntaiyār, *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu*, 324 (Ramanujan 1985, 51)

A YOUNG WARRIOR

O heart
sorrowing
for this lad

once scared of a stick
lifted in mock anger
when he refused
a drink of milk,
  now
not content with killing
war elephants
with spotted trunks,

this son
of the strong man who fell yesterday

seems unaware of the arrow
in his wound,

his head of hair is plumed
like a horse's,

he has fallen
on his shield,

his beard still soft.

Poṉmuṭiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 310 (Ramanujan 1985, 165)

The first poem is an *akam* or 'interior' poem, the second a *puṟam* or 'exterior' one. The two genres define each other mutually; what one is, the other is not. They differ in structure, effects, and the emotions represented. The first poem moves from the outer (wilderness, heat, the man being far away from home, searching for wealth and education in the external world) toward the inner (the image inside him, the woman at home, her hair and the touch of her skin). It refers to no names—for in the interior world there are no names; archetypes have none. The second poem moves from within the household (*akam*) to the battlefield (*puṟam*), from a childhood self to the adolescent killed in battle. *Puṟam* poems (generally) refer to names of persons and places, history, a real society outside the family. Each genre occupies a niche in the literary economy. While the two genres are thus correlative, are responsive to each other, and define each other's limits, they also share the same landscapes and imagery. In the first example given below, a young woman describes her new lover. In the second, a poet laments a death.

WHAT SHE SAID

And all those horses
our man of the tall hills
comes riding on
have tufts of hair
like the brahman urchins
in our town.

Kapilar, *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu*, 202 (Ramanujan 1985, 9)

THE HORSE DID NOT COME BACK

The horse did not come back,
his horse did not come back.
All the other horses have come back.

The horse
of your good man,
father in our house
to a little son
with a tuft of hair
like a plume on a steed,
it did not come back.

Has it fallen now,
his horse
that bore him through battle,

has it fallen
like the great tree
standing at the meeting place
of two rivers?

Erumai Veḷiyaṉār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 273 (Ramanujan 1985, 179)

The two poems come from different anthologies, composed by different poets. The similitude connecting the little boy's tuft of hair and the plume on his horse is the same, but the order is reversed. They share the language, the poetic code, use the same structure to make different poems. The two universes, *akam* and *puṟam*, love and war, correspond to one another.

They are classified in symmetric ways. The seven types of *akam* poems correspond to seven types of *puṟam* poems. They share common imagery, although the correspondences are not strict or mechanical. Here are two examples, the second one a poem quoted above but now viewed in a different context:

WHAT HER MOTHER SAID

If a calving cow
chewed up her purslane creeper
growing near the house,

she'd throw the ball to the ground,
push away the doll,
and beat herself on her pretty tummy,
my little girl,
who knows now how to do things.

With a look tender as a doe's,
she'd refuse the milk
mixed with honey
her foster-mother and I would bring,
she'd sob and cry.

She was that way till yesterday.
    Yet today,
trusting the lies
of a blackbeard man
she's gone
through the wilderness, laughing
they say,
showing her white teeth
like new buds on a palm tree.

Anonymous, *Naṟṟiṇai*, 179 (Ramanujan 1985, 65)

A YOUNG WARRIOR

O heart
sorrowing
for this lad
once scared of a stick
lifted in mock anger
when he refused
a drink of milk,
    now
not content with killing
war elephants
with spotted trunks,

this son
of the strong man who fell yesterday

seems unaware of the arrow
in his wound,

his head of hair is plumed
like a horse's,

he has fallen
on his shield,

his beard still soft.

Poṉmuṭiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 310 (Ramanujan 1985, 165)

These two poems trace a similar curve of growth, from childhood to adolescence, from presence to absence: both are laments, the second for a death. In the tradition, the poems belong to parallel genres (*palai* that speaks of deserts and elopements, *vakai* that speaks of battlefields and

deaths of heroes). Thus *akam* and *puṟam* become mirrors for each other, metaphors for each other. Ironic juxtapositions become potent in such a shared universe of signifiers:

A LEAF IN LOVE AND WAR

The chaste trees, dark-clustered,
blend with the land
that knows no dryness;
the colours on the leaves
mob the eyes.

    We've seen those leaves
    on jewelled women,
    on their mounds
    of love.

Now the chaste wreath lies slashed
on the ground, so changed, so mixed
with blood, the vulture snatches it
with its beak,
thinking it raw meat.

We see this too
just because a young man
in love with war
wore it for glory.

Veṟipāṭiya Kāmakkaṇṇiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 271

Furthermore, in such traditions, poems do not come singly, but in sequences often arranged in tens, hundreds, sometimes thousands: sharing motifs, images, structures, yet playing variations that individuate each poem. Every poem resonates with the absent presence of others that sound with it, like the unstruck strings of a sitar. So we respond to a system of presences and absences; our reading then is not linear but what has been called 'radial' (McGann 1988, 21). Every poem is part of a large self-reflexive paradigm; it relates to all others in absentia, gathers ironies, allusions; one text becomes the context of others. Each is precisely foregrounded against a background of all the others.

Once such genres are established, they not only classify, they generate. The settled conventions make possible, indeed cry out for, another kind of reflexivity. Poems beget metapoems that reflect on themselves or their kind, make the audience conscious of the genre and its limits.

Genres give rise to antigenres and metagenres that still use all the properties of the genre they are parodying or reflecting on. Here are an *akam* and a *puram* poem about *akam* and *puram* poems:

WHAT SHE SAID

Before I laughed with him
    nightly,

    the slow waves beating
    on his wide shores
    and the palmyra
    bringing forth heron-like flowers
    near the waters,
my eyes were like the lotus
my arms had the grace of the bamboo
my forehead was mistaken for the moon.

But now

    Maturai Eruttāḷan̲ Centampūtan̲, *Kuruntokai*, 226
    (Ramanujan 1985, 72)

Pāri! Pāri! they cry,
these poets
with their good red tongues,
praising one man
in many ways:

    yet it's not only Pāri,

the rains too
keep the world
going
in these parts.

    Kapilar: on Pāri, *Purananuru*, 107

The first one is an *akam* poem about *akam* poems. Other poems have compared the woman's brow to the moon, her shoulders to the bamboo; the woman in this poem realises that she once fit the conventions, but now in her grief she doesn't anymore. The second one is a *puram* poem about *puram* poems. The poet Kapilar, who wrote a series of fifteen or so poems in praise of Pāri, writes this one too—as if he had earned the right to. In such metapoems, we see that reflexivity takes us out of the genres and commonplaces even while they use them—mirrors become windows, poet and Pāri see not only poet and Pāri but the rains as well.

Two centuries later, in another movement of self-awareness, a whole anthology of poems, *Kalittokai*, reflects on and makes comic love poems, playing on the audience's knowledge of the *akam* poems. They are too long to quote here.[4] I shall speak briefly of reflexive humour at the end of this paper.

Around the same time (fifth to sixth centuries), *bhakti* poets use the poems of love and war and remake them into poems that express their love of god, their praise of his valour. They include the whole erotic tradition and make it speak of something else, devotion to a god. Here is an early love poem and a later *bhakti* poem.

WHAT HER GIRL-FRIEND SAID

These fat cassia trees
are gullible:

    the season of rains
    that he spoke of
    when he went through the stones
    of the desert
    is not yet here

    though these trees
    mistaking the untimely rains
    have put out
    their long arrangement of flowers
    on the twigs

    as if for a proper monsoon.

    Kōvatattan̲, *Kuruntokai*, 66 (Ramanujan 1985, 70)

WHAT HER GIRL-FRIEND SAID

They haven't flowered yet,
the fat *konrai* trees,
nor hung out their garlands
    and golden circlets
in their sensual canopy of leaves
along the branches,

dear girl,
dear as the paradise of our lord
who measured the earth
    girdled by the restless sea:

they are waiting
with buds
for the return
of your lover
once twined in your arms.

Nammāḻvār (ninth century), *Tiruviruttam*, 68
(Ramanujan 1981, 158–9)

Thus, the tradition of Tamil classical poetry organises itself—or gets organised thus by the anthologists, commentators, and audiences, which include the poets in the tradition. Reflexivity of various kinds is crucial to the developments—*akam* and *puṟam* poems, comic parodies, and lastly religious poems where bards are replaced by saints and the chieftains by the gods. Out of a first language of Tamil, and the region's landscape and culture, a second is fashioned, which is as capable of 'an infinite use of finite means' as the first.

NECESSARY BACKGROUNDS

Various bodies of literary, religious, *śāstric*, or ideological materials, as they come into being at different periods, become part of the vocabulary of Indian literatures. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina texts, especially legends, stereotypes, beliefs, and the commonly known controversies among them; the three *śāstra* texts or manuals of managing love or *kāma*, worldly affairs or *artha*, and ethical (and ritual) conduct or *dharma* by three sage-figures, Vātsyāyana, Kauṭilya, and Manu; commonly held notions of *yoga, tantra*, and *bhakti*; and, lastly, the three mythological systems that are elaborated around Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the Goddess—all these become part of the web of Indian allusion, the common stock that makes Indian intertextuality possible. As all reading presupposes intertextuality in any culture, reading Indian poems presupposes the specifics of Indian intertextuality—any universality that we may leap to requires the ground of such 'interinanimation' of local meanings. I do not mean to say that every reader needs a detailed textual knowledge of these various texts but that much of it is part of common parlance. Wordsworth's sentence regarding the use of science in poetry must be borne in mind: that poetry is 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge' (Wordsworth 1802). When it is commonly held, knowledge, play, allusion, parody, inversion and nuance of every sort become possible.

have Māya for mother-in-law;
the world for father-in-law;
three brothers-in-law, like tigers;

and the husband's thoughts
are full of laughing women:
no god, this man.

And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.

But I will
give this wench the slip
and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord.

My mind is my maid:
by her kindness, I join
my Lord,
my utterly beautiful Lord
from the mountain-peaks,
my lord white as jasmine,
and I will make Him
my good husband.

Mahādevi, 328 (Ramanujan 1938, 141)

Or take this Bengali love poem addressed to Kṛṣṇa:

She speaks:

Let the earth of my body be mixed with the earth
my beloved walks on.
Let the fire of my body be the brightness
in the mirror that reflects his face.
Let the water of my body join the waters
of the lotus pool he bathes in.
Let the breath of my body be air
lapping his tired limbs.
Let me be sky, and moving through me
that cloud-dark Shyāma my beloved.

Govinda-dāsa says, O golden one,
Could he of the emerald body let you go?

(Dimock and Levertov 1967, 58)

Anyone who knows the Hindu notions of death and the Vedic chant recited during the death ritual would see a strong allusion to them in the above poem. The relevant Vedic verses are:

[*To the dead man*:] May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature; or to the waters, if that is your fate. Take root in the plants with your limbs. (*Rgveda*, 10.16; O'Flaherty 1981, 49)

This allusion brings love and death into one fold, as well as the dissolution in death into one's elements and the merging with God—the wish for love, for its despair, and to come undone into the five elements in which God can move as a lover moves in his woman: 'may cloud-dark Shyāma move through me.'

The three myth systems, which are the necessary background of Indian literatures, are related and contrasted in several ways among themselves. Śiva and Viṣṇu are male, Devī is female. She can do what the male gods cannot. Though they may have come into Indian religion and literature at different periods, like other components, once they have come into being, they become coeval and interact in the same space and time. Śiva and Viṣṇu too are complementary: Viṣṇu sleeps on the ocean of milk, Śiva meditates on the mountain; Viṣṇu has incarnations, Śiva has only *līlās*, or *tiruviḷaiyāṭal*, 'divine games'. More important, Śiva gives boons to whoever does certain kinds of penance, even to demons, for penances are effective as all coercive magic is because it presupposes a law that 'doing A would result in B'. Sacrifices, penances, ritual mantras, and later the recitation of certain texts at certain times, and so on, all partake of that law. And Śiva (and in some myths, Brahma) seems to embody that law. When he, following automatically that law of coercive magic, gives a demon a disastrous, world-destroying boon, as he does to Rāvaṇa, Hiraṇyakaśipu, and others, it is Viṣṇu who incarnates himself to save the world—he is the loophole, as Śiva is the law. Śiva is the contract, but Viṣṇu reads the small print. When Hiraṇyakaśipu receives a boon that he cannot be killed during the day or the night, inside or outside a dwelling, by man, god or beast, by any weapon human or divine, Viṣṇu, in a moment of liminal fiat, finds a path 'betwixt and between' all these opposites. He incarnates himself as a half-man half-lion figure, grabs the demon at twilight, sits on the threshold, puts him on his lap (between heaven and earth), and disembowels him with his claws.

Or, when Śiva gives Bhasmāsura, the Ash Demon, the power to send anyone up in flames by merely placing his palm on his head, and the demon wants to try it first on Śiva himself, Viṣṇu comes to the rescue. He takes on the *avatāra* of Mohinī, an enchantress, and flirts with the demon until he is madly infatuated with her. And, in the course of teaching him various dance postures by example, she puts her hand on her own head, and he does too—and he goes up in flames. Later sectarian mythologies vie with each other to make fun of each other's gods—Viṣṇu is a 'karmi' (*karma* possessor) and therefore has so many lives, but Śiva is 'niṣkarmi', or one without any *karma* whatever, says Basavaṇṇa the Vīraśaiva in a moment of sectarian passion.

THE TWO EPICS

Stories about stories, frame stories, and nested ones, as well as various self-referential devices like plays within plays, abound in Indian classical and folk literatures. Like the short poems, whole epics tend to be repeated, remembered, reworked, and renewed, not just translated but transmuted utterly, in the many languages of India.

More than three hundred *Rāmāyaṇas* have been composed since the first Sanskrit one by Vālmīki; readers, reciters, and authors in the mother tongues are usually aware of more than one *Rāmāyaṇas*, so that there are always comparisons, the play of reflections setting off one against the other. Later *Rāmāyaṇas* become meta-*Rāmāyaṇas*. In the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (eleventh century?), as in every other *Rāmāyaṇa*, the hero Rāma is exiled. He tries to dissuade his gentle wife Sītā from going with him into the dangerous forest, but Sītā insists on sharing the exile and the hardships with him. When Rāma continues to argue, Sītā is exasperated and wins the argument by acclaiming: 'Countless *Rāmāyaṇas* have been composed. Do you know of one where Sītā does not go into the forest with Rāma?' Such self-reference to other or prior examples of the narrative, often implicit, make texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* not merely single autonomous texts but also members of a series with a family resemblance. When we add Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* and folk *Rāmāyaṇas*, the Rāma story becomes a language with which each text says many different things in different periods and regions—but they require each other because they refer to each other. In referring to others of the family, they inevitably refer to themselves as well (see chap. 7, 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*' below).

Furthermore, the Indian epics come with frame stories: the bards who compose the epics tell you the story of why and how they composed them. Early in the *Rāmāyaṇa* the sage Vālmīki watches a cruel hunter's arrow shoot down the male of a pair of loving birds (Goldman 1985, *Sarga* 2, verses 9–41). The sage feels in himself the grief of the bird circling around its dead mate, curses the hunter—and suddenly becomes self-aware and realises that his curse has a certain rhythm and metre. He decides to

compose the entire epic in that metre. And, replicating the grief of the bird, the separation of loved ones, of parents and sons, brother and brother, husband and wife, becomes the central leitmotif. This incident embodies an important Indian conception of poetry and creativity—how the feelings of real life (*bhāva*) become structured into poetic emotion (*rasa*), as Vālmīki's *śoka* or grief found itself a *śloka* or stanza.

In the seventh canto, called the *Uttarakāṇḍa* or *Uttararāmāyaṇa*, 'post-*Rāmāyaṇa*', probably a later addition, Vālmīki shelters and takes care of the exiled pregnant Sītā, and when she gives birth to twins, teaches them (among other things) the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* he has composed. The young bards recite it to Rāma himself, and he doesn't know they are his children. The hero hears his own story, sees himself become a story.

The *Mahābhārata* too has a story about why and when it is being told—the great grandson of the Pāṇḍava heroes performs a vengeful snake sacrifice that would kill all snakes because his father died by snakebite; in the course of the sacrifice, he hears his own ancestors' story, beginning with his father's and going backward (van Buitenen 1973, 1: 123). Vyāsa, the composer of the *Mahābhārata* epic, is also a character in the story: he is a grandfather of the warring families, and he appears in the story (in the third person) on several crucial occasions. Even the style of the epic, which is generally simple but occasionally peppered with a big word, is explained by a legend, a story about the story: Vyāsa, when he began the epic, needed a scribe. Gaṇeśa offered himself, except that he was impatient and needed the dictation to be uninterrupted. So Vyāsa would throw in a different word now and then to stall his scribe's speedy writing, to gain time and think of the next thing to say. In folk versions, they say that Vyāsa, unlike his indefatigable scribe, was only mortal and had to go answer calls of nature, which interrupted his flow of words. So he had to throw in a hard word for Gaṇeśa to puzzle out while he ran out to relieve himself. Folk versions embody, domesticate, and humanize the gods, heroes and poets of the classics. Thus the folk version rings one more change on a well-known written version—of a story that is itself about the way an oral text was converted into the written.

May one go further and suggest that the two major epics of India, well-known in Sanskrit and in many regional forms, each version a work in its own right, are 'aware' of each other? The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* contains the Rāma story in its maw; Hanumān, the henchman of Rāma, reappears in the *Mahābhārata*. He even tells the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* to Bhīma, taking us out of one kind of epic to another. When Arjuna hears of Yudhiṣṭhira's lie, he is reminded of Rāma's unjust killing of Vāli (Matilal).

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, earlier in origin but later in completion probably, is in direct contrast to the *Mahābhārata* in style, characters, episodes, and moral tone. The heroes of the latter are polyandrous, five brothers married to one woman—two of the brothers have other wives as well. The hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is steadfastly monogamous. The former are complex, ambiguous: each fails spectacularly, at least once, in the very virtue for which he is 'world-famous'. The virtue around which each ego is built is questioned, shown its true face. Arjuna, the greatest of warriors, has a failure of nerve at the first moment of battle (occasioning thereby the entire *Bhagavadgītā*, which brings him back to the world of action). Yudhiṣṭhira, wedded to truthfulness, is made to tell a lie that passes for truth only because Yudhiṣṭhira has never been known to tell a lie. Bhīma, the strongest of men, can win at single combat only by hitting his enemy below the belt. Kṛṣṇa, the god on the side of the Pāṇḍavas, plays dirty all the time. The Pāṇḍavas, the good guys, can win only by his subterfuges. The values are ambiguous; no character is unmixed; every act is questionable, and therefore questioned. Not *dharma*, the good life of right conduct, but *dharmasūkṣmatā* or the subtle nature of *dharma* that mixes good and evil in every act, the impossible labyrinth of the moral life, is the central theme of the *Mahābhārata*. So, the character of every person and the propriety of every major act is the subject of endless legal debate and moral scrutiny.

But in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, personal integrity (*dhṛti*, not *dharma*), fidelity, is supreme. Like an existential hero, Rāma picks his way toward his ideal, through accident, obstacle, and temptation. He is, in fact, untemptable, cruel in his vow of chastity, admirable but unlovely in his literal insistence on what is just, even against faithful wife and obedient brother. As character is all, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is full of suspicions and doubts—every character and virtue, even the chastity of Sītā and the fidelity of Lakṣmaṇa, are tested in the crucible of doubt. The *Mahābhārata* is replete with legal debates because *dharma* itself is subtle (*sūkṣma*); the *Rāmāyaṇa* is replete with doubts, tests, and acts of truths because everything in *dharma* depends on character.

Within the works, the substories (like Nala's) often reflect and condense, as in a concave mirror, the main tale. The story of Nala, told to Yudhiṣṭhira when he is despondent, exiled in the forest, gives him a perspective on himself, completes in imagination the curve of his life: for Nala, like him, has gambled away his kingdom to his brother, even lost

his wife, wanders in the forest, but finally regains wife and kingdom. The substory contains the main story, as the main story contains the substory. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has important subplots with animals and demons as characters (unlike the *Mahābhārata*). In this epic, where the main characters are single-minded, all superego and no id, animals and demons provide the underworld—they steal wives, cheat brothers, break promises, though some of them (Jaṭāyu the bird, Hanumān the monkey, Vibhīṣaṇa the demon) serve Rāma faithfully. They provide the netherworld, the underbelly of the virtues.

The Hindu tradition is well aware of the co-presence and complementarity of these two texts, especially of the complementarity of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa as gods. (A clever and somewhat silly long poem was once composed in which the same words could be read two ways, to yield either the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata*.) In the roster of Viṣṇu's incarnations, monogamous Rāma appears earlier than Kṛṣṇa. While Rāma is monogamous, as we noted earlier, Kṛṣṇa is the eternal tireless lover of sixteen thousand cowherd women, the very incarnation of the 'polymorphous perverse'. A story about Rāma says that sixteen thousand sages wanted union with him. They love him and want to be one with him; they would turn themselves into women for his sake. But Rāma asks them to wait; he has taken a vow of monogamy and cannot oblige them in his present incarnation. But, in the next age, he would be reincarnated as Kṛṣṇa and they as cowherd women; then he would take them on.

In a Sanskrit poem that itself has several incarnations in different anthologies (see discussion below), Kṛṣṇa the child is depicted as remembering in half-sleep his previous incarnation as Rāma, fighting a battle with his bow and arrow. One incarnation dreams of another and relives it. In the story of the sixteen thousand sages, Rāma anticipates his opposite, Kṛṣṇa; in this poem Kṛṣṇa remembers his other self, Rāma:

'Once there was a man named Rāma.' 'Yes.' 'His wife was called Sītā.' 'Yes.'
'Rāvaṇa abducted her from Rāma during his stay in the Pañcavaṭī forest in obedience to his father's command.'

Hari, indicating with yesses that he was listening to his mother's bedtime story, said, 'My bow, my bow, where is my bow, Lakṣmaṇa?' May these alarmed words protect us.

Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛta, 72 (Wilson 1975, 166)

A poem with this motif occurs quite early in Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakośa*, and later in *Sūrsāgar*, attributed to Sūrdās.[5] In each case the

poem functions quite differently while playing on the motif of Kṛṣṇa's hypnagogic memory of his own past incarnation as Rāma. In the poem attributed, however falsely yet truly, to Sūrdās (for it fits into Sūr's central concerns), the motif is used to foreground the divinity and the timelessness of the child; it is an epiphany.

'Listen, son, and I'll tell you a lovely story.'
The lotus-eyed was overjoyed;
    the clever gem made sleepy sounds.
'Daśaratha was a king, of the line of Raghu,
    and he had four sons.
The greatest, named Rāma,
    wed the daughter of Janaka.
On his father's oath he left the kingdom,
    went into the forest with brother and bride.
Then as he, the noble one, lotus-eyed,
    ran after the golden deer
Rāvaṇa stole Sītā away'—
    Nanda's son heard, and awoke, and arose:
'My bow, my bow!' shouted Sūr's Lord,
    'Lakṣmaṇa!
        Give me my bow!'—and his mother drew back in awe.

Sūrdās (Bryant 1978, 53–4)

What is merely suggested in one poem may become central in a 'repetition' or an 'imitation' of it. Mimesis is never only mimesis, for it evokes the earlier image in order to play with it and make it mean other things. When the 'same' Indian poem appears in different ages and bodies of poetry, we cannot dismiss the recurrences as interlopers and anachronisms, for they become signifiers in a new system: mirrors again that become windows.

I have suggested above, and elsewhere, that in traditions like the Indian, different genres (and generic texts like these epics) specialise in different 'provinces of reality' (see chap. 28, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', below). What one does, another does not. The realities of the civilisation are expressed in a spectrum of forms, where one complements, contradicts, reflects, and refracts another—we have to take them together to make sense of the civilisation and catch a glimpse of the complex whole. Each has to be read in the light of others, as each is defined by the presence of others in the memory of both poet and audience—like the Mahādevī poem quoted above, in the light of texts that speak of *māyā*,

the three *guṇas*, *vāsanas* and so on, or the Bengali love-death poem by Govinda-dāsa, in the context of the Vedic hymn about death.

Contradictions, inversions, multiple views, multiforms affecting and animating one another, expressing conflict and dissent through the same repertoire of forms—all these are ways the traditions relate to each other. Reflexivity binds them together and gives them a common yet creative language for dissent. Without the other, there is no language for the self.

Among Western thinkers, Bakhtin's dialogism seems to anticipate some of these thoughts. Speaking of Dostoevsky's heroes, he says, 'Every thought . . . senses itself to be from the very beginning a rejoinder in an unfinished dialogue. Such thought is not impelled towards a well-rounded, finalized, systematically monologic whole. It lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's consciousness' (quoted in Clark and Holquist 1984, 242).

ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS

At least three large, alternative coexistent traditions invert, oppose, and otherwise reflect on the so-called Great Traditions (*mārga*). (Buddhism and Jainism take part in these interactions, but I shall not consider them here.) One is folklore, often included under little traditions or oral traditions, not necessarily or merely rural, and expressed through the dialects of the mother tongues. Another is *bhakti*, the personal/devotional revolutionary form of Hinduism that comes into vigorous being first in the sixth century in the Tamil area. *Bhakti* too, like the folklore with which it has intimate connections, is local, expressed through the mother tongues—yet, like folklore, it has a pan-Indian network, a repertoire of types and genres that is trans-regional. Like folktales and proverbs, *bhakti* poems share motifs, ideas, forms, and poetics across regions and languages. Both take characteristic adversary positions with the *mārga* or elite Great/Sanskrit Traditions (for me, Sanskritic includes many works in the literary dialects of the mother tongues). They also produce various in-between shades and mixtures in their exchanges with the latter—some *bhakti* poems reject the Vedas fiercely, others pay lip-service to them, and still others respect them and go their own way. Similarly, folk myths often connect local myths with the pan-Indian ones, marry local goddesses to the Great Gods, making the latter the sons-in-law of the locality. (South Indian gods, like Murugan, often have two wives, with contrasted characters and who are often quarrelsome, one Sanskritic, another Tamil and earthy). Or they repeat the pan-Indian myths in clear or garbled versions, but very often they reverse the values.

In this section I shall attend briefly to the strong and ever-present anti- and counterstructures in these alternative traditions.

The third countersystem, *tantra*, is recognized within the culture as 'left-handed' (*vāmācāra*) to indicate its symmetric inversion of the 'right-handed' orthodox traditions. It enjoins what the latter taboos—five *m*'s (*matsya* or fish, *māṃsa* or meat, *mudrā* or aphrodisiac grains, *maithuna* or sexual congress, and *madya* or liquor), all under ritually controlled, hardly erotic or orgiastic conditions. *Tantra* as an esoteric system of spiritual exercises crosses and networks the three major religious communities and develops Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain forms, as *bhakti* does too. In fact, the three great sources of counterstructures, *bhakti*, *tantra* and folklore, all relate to each other and also have Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain forms—creating overlaps, intermediate genres, indeed, 'a scale of forms'.[6] *Tantra* inverts, and extreme forms of *bhakti* subvert; folk forms rework and domesticate the orthodox brahmanical traditions. I have summarised the relations between the latter and *bhakti* in Fig. 1 (Ramanujan 1973, 34). Similar diagrams with permeable membranes between them can be made, if one is so inclined, for the whole scale of forms.

	STRUCTURE		ANTI-STRUCTURE
	Establishment: 'public' religion		*Protest: 'personal' religion*
	Great tradition	Little tradition	
Text	Vedas, etc.	Local Puranas, etc.	
Performance	Vedic ritual	Local sacrifices, etc.	*versus* Bhakti
Social organisation	Caste hierarchy	Sects and cults	
Mythology	Pan-Indian deities	Regional deities	

Fig. 1: Hinduism. The dotted lines indicate the 'permeable membranes' that allow transfusion.

As I have shown elsewhere, *bhakti* (like that of the Vīraśaivas) rejects not only the great gods and sacrifices but the little ones as well (Ramanujan 1973, 19–55). It satirizes the caste system, the male-female divisions, the rich, the priests, sacred time and sacred space, and so on. Two examples of this vast literature will have to do:

If they see
breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,
if beard and whiskers
they call it man:
but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman

O Rāmanātha

Dāsimayya, 133 (Ramanujan 1973, 110)

The pot is a god. The winnowing
fan is a god. The stone in the
street is a god. The comb is a
god. The bowstring is also a
god. The bushel is a god and the
spouted cup is a god.
Gods, gods, there are so many
there's no place left
for a foot.
There is only
one god. He is our Lord
of the Meeting Rivers.

Basavaṇṇa, 563 (Ramanujan 1973, 84)

Within *bhakti* too there are mirrors and opposites, not only Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava that satirize each other yet share a large common vocabulary, but also *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*, or *sarūpa* and *nirūpa* (as John Carman modifies it), the iconic and non-iconic.[7] One sees god as beyond all attributes, the other as inhabiting all attributes:

Worker of miracles,
magical dwarf,
and killer of the demon
named Honey,

only you can tell us:
becoming fire, water, earth,
sky, and wind,

becoming father, mother,
and the children too
and all others
and all things unnamed,

the way you stand there,
being yourself—
what's it all about?

Nammāḻvār, 7.8.1 (Ramanujan 1981, 17)

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end nor birthmarks.
I love him O mother. Listen.

I love the Beautiful One
with no bond nor fear
no clan no land
no landmarks
for his beauty.

So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.

Take these husbands who die,
decay, and feed them
to your kitchen fires!

Mahādevyyakkā, 283 (Ramanujan 1973, 134)

Yet the iconic and non-iconic cannot do without each other. The first poem sees god in all attributes but does not forget his *paratva* or otherness, his capacity for play, for being above it all. In the second, the woman saint Mahādevyyakkā denies him all attributes, yet loves him passionately, calls him the Handsome One, and ends with a signature line that brings him home to the local temple. *Cennamallikārjuna*, which I translate somewhat literally as 'lord white as jasmine', is also the name of a local manifestation of Śiva.

In the legendary lives of the saints, too, a society is envisaged where the upper-caste male is lower than the female and the untouchable saint;

the former has to struggle in all sorts of ways to shed his pomp and privilege before he can qualify. The women break every rule of Manu's code-book for good wives, almost as if they had the book open in front of them, turning the palm leaves and ticking them off—they refuse sex to their husbands, terrify them, produce no children, describe themselves as adulteresses, call god their lover without shame, live outdoors, sometimes throw away modesty and clothes, teach lessons to male *gurus*, and so on. The upper-caste male saints, tested by a difficult god, have to skin buffaloes for him, or cook their own young son's flesh into a curry for him, or behave like untouchables and cannibals, even offer their wives and give up their final pride in masculinity and become as women in their love for him. The god, in turn, submits himself to lashings and other indignities, eats their offal, plays marriage counsellor to one and midwife to another's daughter when the river is in flood and help is cut off. He vies with them in a game of mutual cannibalism and often loses:

My dark one
    stands there as if nothing's
        changed
after taking entire
into his maw
    all three worlds
        the gods
    and the good kings
who hold their lands
    as a mother would
        a child in her womb—

and I
    by his leave
have taken him entire

and I have him in my belly
for keeps.

    Nammālvār, 8.7.9 (Ramanujan 1981, 67)

One can go on. I think I have said enough to convey the systematic (not random) subversion and reversals that *bhakti* offers to its surrounding systems (see Ramanujan 1973 and 1981).

FOLKLORE

Folklore offers another alternative, bounces off the so-called high culture in systematic ways. Where the texts of the latter have *karma* ideologies, for instance, folktales have none or very little of it. The few that talk of them, talk of them only to show how to outwit *karma*. The gods of mythology do not sweat, smell, or sneeze, and the goddesses do not menstruate. But in folklore, they do. They are embodied. Epic heroines like Sītā are chaste, obedient, wait to be rescued. Folk versions make Sītā warlike, leading battles against demons (Shulman 1986). Comedies of unchaste but clever wives delight the 'folk'. I shall give only one detailed contrast to show the systemic reversal that folklore often presents to the literate culture. In the mythology of goddesses, the Sanskritic great goddess is created by the gods who pool all their weapons and powers and send her forth to conquer a demon they cannot singly vanquish. But in south Indian village myths, the goddess is primal, she gives the great gods their insignia and weapons (the conch of Viṣṇu, the third eye of Śiva), and the gods use them against her and degrade her. The village goddess stands in stark contrast to the great consort goddesses (Lakṣmi, Pārvatī): she is not subordinate to a male; her icons often have no sculpted face or figure; she is offered animal sacrifices; and her grace consists of leaving you alone. Where the consort goddesses are breast mothers, deities of the life cycle, of birth, marriage, family, she is a tooth mother, deity of crises and breakdowns in the life cycle. They are birthless, or born of the sea or the mountain. Her myths tell horrid tales of a brahman woman deceived into marrying an untouchable and bearing children. When she discovers that she has been the victim of a cruel deception, her fury gives her demonic powers. Instead of a consecration, it is a desecration that makes her a goddess. In her fury, she devours her children and kills the buffalo that her husband has entered in his panic. Different parts of the emotional spectrum are explored (as in *akam* and *puṟam*) in these two kinds of deities. The consort goddesses descend; the village goddess is a human who ascends to godhood. Indian conceptions of divinity are not complete without taking these confrontations into account.

Indian humour plays with all the great themes and turns them back on themselves (Siegel 1987). Here are three instances, one on *māyā* (the doctrine of illusion), one on *bhakti* (faith), and the third on *sannyāsīs* (world-renouncers).

1. A teacher of Śaṅkara's school was eloquent on the doctrine of *māyā*. He convinced his disciples that the world was an illusion, only the transcendent was real. They were convinced; they were dazzled. Just then a mad elephant rushed into their midst, uprooting trees, wreaking havoc. The teacher was the first to see it, and he got up in a hurry and began to run for his life. The disciples, still in a daze, called out to him

'*guruji, guruji*, all this is *māyā*, the elephant is only *māyā*! Don't run!' The *guru*, not stopping for a second, said, 'It's true. The elephant is *māyā*. But my running away also is *māyā*,' and he ran away.

2. A famous *guru* had hundreds of disciples all over the region. He used to tour the province in a palanquin, visit town after town, receive tribute and bestow blessings on all of them. It took him twelve years to make one of these rounds. Once when he came to the gates of a town, he was stopped by a man who looked like an idiot, who insisted that the *guru* should tell him how he could get to heaven. The *guru* laughed and said, 'Just stand there, with your hands raised to the sky, and you will go to heaven.' He didn't even stop his palanquin. He moved on. Twelve years later, after another round of visits and tributes, he came back to the same spot. He was intrigued by what he saw: a man in tatters, hair and nails grown long, standing there with his hands faithfully raised to the sky. And as the *guru* approached, he could see that the idiot was slowly rising toward heaven. The *guru* at once understood what was happening, got down from his palanquin, held on to the feet of the idiot, and went with him to heaven.

3. A *sannyāsī* had only a loin cloth but the mice were nibbling at it. So he went and got himself a cat. The cat needed milk. So he acquired a cow. Someone had to look after the cow. So he found a woman to look after the cow, who also began to look after him. He married her and threw away his loin cloth.

CONCLUSION

Mirror in mirror. Doubles, shadow worlds, upside-down reflections, are common in Indian myth and story. When Viśvāmitra the sage sent his protégé Triśaṅku to heaven and the gods would not accept him and threw him down, the sage held him midair with his powers. And, piqued by his own failure to send Triśaṅku to heaven, he decided to make a second world exclusively for him, a world like the first but a bit botched: it is said that the buffalo is Viśvāmitra's version of the cow, the donkey his version of the horse, and so on.

The creation of doubles is a favourite literary device. In some *Rāmāyaṇas*, the chaste Sītā is not abducted at all, only a shadow double suffers all the hardships. Seducers in Indian texts appear as replicas of the husband. When Śiva creates, he creates clones of himself. As with DNA, to create is to project one's copies onto the world. These doubles in myths have recently been studied by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1984).

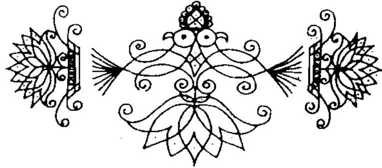
A Hindi folktale reflects further on such reflections; it is even a text about our texts constantly generating doubles and 'laughing twins' that soon become independent of them and begin to live next to them:

Kallū and his wife Raziyā were poor farmers. One day Kallū dug up a large pot, which he brought home to his wife. He dropped his tobacco pouch into it by mistake, and when his wife reached into the pot to take it out, she discovered not one but two pouches in it, each one filled with tobacco and the five rupees that Kallū had kept in the pouch. So into the pot they put their wool blanket (they had only one between them), and the single blanket became two. Then they put in an old coat, their tattered bedding, whatever they had, and the pot made everything double. They put the tobacco pouch in over and over again, until they were surrounded by a heap of pouches, each containing tobacco and five rupees. They spent much of the night counting their new wealth.

On the next day, as Raziyā was cooking in the pot, she slipped on a pile of potatoes and fell into the pot. Kallū sprang forward and pulled her out, but then he saw a second Raziyā struggling to get her hands and feet out of the pot. He pulled her out, but Raziyā shrieked, 'Where has this bitch come from? I'll never allow her to stay in my house. Why did you pull her out? Just stuff her right back in again.' Abashed, Kallū said, 'What have I done? One wife has always been plenty for me, but how could I leave her lying in the pot? And now if we stick her back, won't we just be making the same mistake again?' The new Raziyā sat frightened, head in hands, staring at the husband and wife; but when Kallū reached over to touch the original Raziyā, she pushed him away, and he lost his balance and landed in the pot. The two Raziyās jumped up and pulled him out; then they helped out the second Kallū, who was struggling to get out of the pot.

Then Raziyā and Kallū used the pot to make a separate house for the new couple and to outfit it with all the necessary household goods. The neighbours were surprised to see how wealthy Kallū and his wife had become, and they were still more bewildered to discover that they had set up, next door to them, another couple, resembling themselves exactly. 'It must be his brother,' they concluded at last.[8]

Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay



Walter Benjamin once dreamed of hiding behind a phalanx of quotations which, like highwaymen, would ambush the passing reader and rob him of his convictions.

I

Stanislavsky had an exercise for his actors. He would give them an everyday sentence like, 'Bring me a cup of tea', and ask them to say it forty different ways, using it to beg, question, mock, wheedle, be imperious, etc. My question, 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?', is a good one for such an exercise. Depending on where the stress is placed, it contains many questions—all of which are real questions—asked again and again when people talk about India. Here are a few possible versions:

Is there an Indian way of thinking?
Is there *an* Indian way of thinking?
Is there an *Indian* way of thinking?
Is there an Indian way of *thinking*?

The answers are just as various. Here are a few: There *was* an Indian way of thinking; there isn't any more. If you want to learn about the Indian way of thinking, do not ask your modern-day citified Indians, go to the pundits, the *vaidikas*, the old texts. On the contrary: India never changes; under the veneer of the modern, Indians still think like the Vedas.

The second question might elicit answers like these: There is no single Indian way of thinking; there are Great and Little Traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste and region has its special worldview. So, under the apparent diversity, there

is really a unity of viewpoint, a single supersystem. Vedists see a Vedic model in all Indian thought. Nehru made the phrase 'unity in diversity' an Indian slogan. The Sahitya Akademi's line has been, 'Indian literature is one, though written in many languages.'

The third question might be answered: What we see in India is nothing special to India; it is nothing but pre-industrial, pre-printing press, face-to-face, agricultural, feudal. Marxists, Freudians, McLuhanites, all have their labels for the stage India is in, according to their schemes of social evolution; India is only an example. Others, of course, would argue the uniqueness of the Indian Way and how it turns all things, especially rivals and enemies, into itself; look at what has happened to Indo-Europeans in India, they would say: their language gets shot with retroflexes, their syntax with nominal compounds, they lose their nerve—the British are only the most recent example (according to Nirad Chaudhuri). Look what happens to Buddhism, Islam, the Parsis. There is an *Indian* way, and it imprints and patterns all things that enter the subcontinent; it is inescapable, and it is Bigger Than All of Us.

The fourth question may question whether Indians think at all: It is the West that is materialistic, rational; Indians have no philosophy, only religion, no positive sciences, not even a psychology; in India, matter is subordinated to spirit, rational thought to feeling, intuition. And even when people agree that this is the case, we can have arguments for and against it. Some lament, others celebrate India's un-thinking ways. One can go on forever.

We—I, certainly—have stood in one or another of these stances at different times. We have not heard the end of these questions—or these answers.

II

The problem was posed for me personally at the age of twenty in the image of my father. I had never taken a good look at him till then. Didn't Mark Twain say, 'At seventeen, I thought my father was ignorant; at twenty, I wondered how he learned so much in three years'? Indeed, this essay was inspired by contemplation of him over the years, and is dedicated to him.

My father's clothes represented his inner life very well. He was a south Indian brahman gentleman. He wore neat white turbans, a Śri Vaiṣṇava caste mark (in his earlier pictures, a diamond earring), yet wore Tootal ties, Kromentz buttons and collar studs, and donned English serge jackets over his muslin *dhotis* which he wore draped in traditional

brahman style. He often wore tartan-patterned socks and silent well-polished leather shoes when he went to the university, but he carefully took them off before he entered the inner quarters of the house.

He was a mathematician, an astronomer. But he was also a Sanskrit scholar, an expert astrologer. He had two kinds of exotic visitors: American and English mathematicians who called on him when they were on a visit to India, and local astrologers, orthodox pundits who wore splendid gold-embroidered shawls dowered by the Maharajah. I had just been converted by Russell to the 'scientific attitude'. I (and my generation) was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology; I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn't seem to care about, or even think about. When I asked him what the discovery of Pluto and Neptune did to his archaic nine-planet astrology, he said, 'You make the necessary corrections, that's all.' Or, in answer to how he could read the Gītā religiously having bathed and painted on his forehead the red and white feet of Viṣṇu, and later talk appreciatively about Bertrand Russell and even Ingersoll, he said, 'The Gītā is part of one's hygiene. Besides, don't you know, the brain has two lobes?'

The following poem says something about the way he and his friends appeared to me:

Sky-man in a man-hole
with astronomy for dream,
astrology for nightmare;

fat man full of proverbs,
the language of lean years,
living in square after

almanac square
prefiguring the day
of windfall and landslide

through a calculus
of good hours,
clutching at the tear

in his birthday shirt
as at a hole
in his mildewed horoscope,

squinting at the parallax
of black planets,
his Tiger, his Hare

moving in Sanskrit zodiacs,
forever troubled
by the fractions, the kidneys

in his Tamil flesh,
his body the Great Bear
dipping for the honey,

the woman-smell
in the small curly hair
down there.

(Ramanujan 1986, 24)

III

Both Englishmen and 'modern' Indians have been dismayed and angered by this kind of inconsistency. About twenty years ago, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* asked a number of modern Indian intellectuals to describe the Indian character—they did not seem to be daunted by the assignment and wrote terse, some quite sharp, columns. *They* all seemed to agree on one thing: the Indian trait of hypocrisy. Indians do not mean what they say, and say different things at different times. By 'Indians' they did not mean only servants. In Max Müller's lectures on India (1883), the second chapter was called 'Truthful character of the Hindus', in answer to many complaints.

Recently I attended a conference on *karma*, a notion that is almost synonymous in some circles with whatever is Indian or Hindu. Brahmanical texts had it, the Buddhists had it, the Jains had it. But when I looked at hundreds of Kannada tales, I couldn't find a single tale that used *karma* as a motif or motive. Yet when their children made a mess, their repertoire of abuse included, 'You are my *karma*!' When Harper (1959) and others after him reported that many Indian villagers didn't know much about reincarnation, such a discrepancy was attributed to caste, education, etc. But the 2,000 Kannada tales, collected by me and others over the past twenty years, were told by brahmans, Jains (both of whom use *karma* in their explanations elsewhere quite readily), and by other communities as well. What is worse, Sheryl Daniel (1983) independently found that her Tamil village alternately used *karma* and *talaividi* ('headwriting') as explanations for the events around them. The two notions are inconsistent with each other. *Karma* implies the self's past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility. *Talaividi* is one's fate inscribed arbitrarily at one's

birth on one's forehead; the inscription has no relation to one's prior actions; usually in such explanations (and folktales about them) past lives are not even part of the scheme.

Another related characteristic seems to preoccupy observers. We have already said that 'inconsistency' (like my father's, or the brahman/Jain use of *karma*) is not a matter of inadequate education or lack of logical rigour. They may be using a different 'logic' altogether. Some thinkers believe that such logic is an earlier stage of 'cultural evolution' and that Indians have not developed a notion of 'data', of 'objective facts'. Edward Said's *Orientalism* cites many such European stereotypes about the 'Third World'. Here is Henry Kissinger's explanation:

Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the world is almost completely *internal* to the observer. . . . [Consequently] empirical reality has a much different significance for many of the new [old] countries than for the West because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it. (Said 1978, 47)

Such a view cannot be dismissed as peculiar to Kissinger's version of Newtonian optics. One meets with it again and again in travelogues, psychological writings, novels. Naipaul quotes Sudhir Kakar, a sophisticated psychoanalyst, deeply knowledgeable in matters Indian as well as Western, an insider/outsider:

Generally among Indians there seems to be a different relationship to outside reality, compared to the one met with in the West. In India it is closer to a certain stage in childhood when outer objects did not have a separate, independent existence but were intimately related to the self and its affective states. . . . The Indian 'ego' is underdeveloped; 'the world of magic' and animistic thinking lie close to the surface; so the grasp of reality is 'relatively tenuous'. (Naipaul 1977, 107)

In a memorable and oft-quoted section of Foster's *A Passage to India*, Mrs Moore muses vividly on the relations between inside and outside in India; the confounding of the two is not special to humans in India:

Going to hang up her cloak, she found the tip of the peg was occupied by a small wasp. She had known this wasp or his relatives by song; they were not as English wasps, but had long yellow legs which hung down behind when they flew. Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch—no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside the house as out, it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses, trees, houses, trees. There he clung, asleep, while jackals bayed their desires and mingled with the percussion of drums. (Foster 1952, 35)

And sympaticos, like Zimmer, praise Indians for not being hung up on an objectivity that distinguishes self from non-self, interior from exterior; what for Naipaul is a 'defect of vision', is for Zimmer vision itself:

India thinks of time and herself . . . in biological terms, terms of the species, not of the ephemeral ego. . . . We of the west regard world history as a biography of mankind, and in particular of Occidental Man. . . . Our will is not to culminate in our human institutions the universal play of nature, but to evaluate, to set ourselves against the play, with an ego-centric tenacity. (Zimmer 1946, 21)

A third trait should be added to 'inconsistency', and to the apparent inability to distinguish self and non-self. One has only to read Manu after a bit of Kant to be struck by the former's extraordinary lack of universality. He seems to have no clear notion of a universal *human* nature from which one can deduce ethical decrees like 'Man shall not kill', or 'Man shall not tell an untruth'. One is aware of no notion of a 'state', no unitary law of all men. Manu 8.267 has the following:

A Kshatriya, having defamed a Brahmana, shall be fined one hundred (*panas*); a Vaisya one hundred and fifty or two hundred; a Sudra shall suffer corporal punishment. (Quoted in Müller 1883)

Even truth-telling is not an unconditional imperative, as Müller's correspondents discovered.

An untruth spoken by people under the influence of anger, excessive joy, fear, pain, or grief, by infants, by very old men, by persons labouring under a delusion, being under the influence of drink, or by mad men, does not cause the speaker to fall, or as we should say, is a venial not a mortal sin. (Gautama, paraphrased in Müller 1883, 70)

Alexander Wilder adds, in a footnote, further extensions:

At the time of marriage, during dalliance, when life is in danger, when the loss of property is threatened, and for the sake of a Brahmana . . . Manu declared . . . whenever the death of a man of any of the four castes would be occasioned by true evidence, falsehood was even better than truth. (Müller 1883, 89)

Contrast this with Kant's well-known formulation of his imperative: 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a Universal Law of Nature' (Copleston 1946, 116).

'Moral judgements are universalizable,' says Mackie (1977, 83). Universalisation means putting oneself in another's place—it is the golden rule of the New Testament, Hobbes' 'law of all men': do not do unto others what you do not want done unto you. The main tradition of Judeo-Christian ethics is based on such a premise of universalisation—Manu

would not understand such a premise. To be moral, for Manu, is to particularise—to ask who did what, to whom and when. Shaw's comment, 'Do not do unto others as you would have they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same' (Mackie 1977, 89) would be closer to Manu's view, except he would substitute 'natures or classes' for 'tastes'. Each class (*jāti*) of man has its own laws, its own proper ethic, not to be universalised. Hegel shrewdly noted this Indian slant: 'While we say, "Bravery is a virtue", the Hindoos say, on the contrary, "Bravery is a virtue of the Cshatriyas" ' (Hegel *ca.* 1827: part 1, section 2, 'India').

Is there any system to this particularism? Indian philosophers do not seem to make synoptic 'systems' like Hegel's or Kant's. Sheryl Daniel (1983) speaks of a 'tool-box' of ideas that Indians carry about, and from which they use one or another without much show of logic; anything goes into their 'bricolage' (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 16–36). Max Weber, in various writings, distinguished 'traditional' and 'rational' religions. Geertz summarises the distinction better than other writers:

> Traditional religions attack problems opportunistically as they arise in each particular instance . . . employing one or another weapon chosen, on grounds of symbolic appropriateness, from their cluttered arsenal of myth and magic . . . the approach . . . is discrete and irregular. . . . Rationalized religions . . . are more abstract, more logically coherent, and more generally phrased. . . . The question is no longer . . . to use a classical example from Evans-Pritchard, 'Why has the granary fallen on my brother . . .?' but rather, 'Why do the good die young and the evil flourish as the green bay tree?' (Geertz 1973, 172)

IV

It is time to step back and try a formulation. The grammarian sees grammar in all things; I shall be true to my bias and borrow a notion from linguistics and try it for size.

There are (or used to be) two kinds of grammatical rules: the context-free and the context-sensitive (Lyons 1971, 235–41). 'Sentences must have subjects and predicates in a certain relation' would be an example of the first kind of rule. 'Plurals in English are realised as *-s* after stops (e.g. dog-s, cat-s), *-es* before fricatives (e.g., latch-es), *-ren* after the word *child*, etc.'—would be a context-sensitive rule. Almost all language rules are of the latter kind.

I think cultures (may be said to) have overall tendencies (for whatever complex reasons)—tendencies to *idealise*, and think in terms of, either the context-free or the context-sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor

in guiding the behaviour. In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation. Manu (I have already quoted a law of his) explicitly says: '[A king] who knows the sacred law, must imagine into the laws of caste (*jāti*), of districts, of guilds, and of families, and [thus] settle the peculiar law of each' (Manu 8.41; see Doniger and Smith 1991, 155).

In an illuminating discussion of the context-sensitive nature of *dharma* in its detail, Baudhāyana enumerates aberrant practices peculiar to the brahmans of the north and those of the south.

> There is difference between the South and the North on five points. We shall describe the practices of the South: to eat with a person not having received Brahmanical initiation: to eat with one's wife; to eat food prepared the previous day; to marry the daughter of the maternal uncle or paternal aunt. And for the North: to sell wool; to drink spirits; to traffic in animals with two rows of teeth; to take up the profession of arms; to make sea voyages.

After this admirable ethnographic description, he notes that all these practices are contrary to the precepts of *śruti* and *smṛti*, but these *śiṣṭas* (learned men) know the traditions and cannot be blamed for following the customs of their district. In the north, the southern ways would be wrong and vice versa. (Lingat 1973, 196)

Add to this view of right and wrong behaviour, the ethical views of the *āsramadharma* (the conduct that is right for one's stage of life), *svadharma* (the conduct that is right for one's station, *jāti* or class, or *svabhāva* or given nature), and *āpaddharma* (conduct that is necessary in times of distress or emergency, e.g. one may even eat the flesh of dogs to save oneself from death by starvation, as sage Viśvāmitra did). Each addition is really a subtraction from any universal law. There is not much left of an absolute or common (*sādhārana*) *dharma* which the texts speak of, if at all, as a last and not as a first resort. They seem to say, if you fit no contexts or conditions, which is unlikely, fall back on the universal.

I know of no Hindu discussion of values which reads like Plato on Beauty in his *Symposium*—which asks the initiate not to rest content with beauty in one embodiment but to be drawn onward from physical to moral beauty, to the beauty of laws and mores, and to all science and learning, and thus to escape 'the mean slavery of the particular case'. (I am reserving counter-instances for later.)

Or take Indian literary texts. No Indian text comes without a context, a frame, till the nineteenth century. Works are framed by *phalaśruti* verses—these verses tell the reader, reciter or listener all the good that

will result from his act of reading, reciting or listening. They relate the text, of whatever antiquity, to the present reader—that is, they contextualise it. An extreme case is that of the Nāḍiśāstra, which offers you your personal history. A friend of mine consulted the Experts about himself and his past and future. After enough rupees had been exchanged, the Experts brought out an old palm-leaf manuscript which, in archaic verses, mentioned his full name, age, birthplace, etc., and said suddenly, 'At this point, the listener is crossing his legs—he should uncross them.'

Texts may be historically dateless, anonymous: but their contexts, uses, efficacies, are explicit. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* open with episodes that tell you why and under what circumstances they were composed. Every such story is encased in a meta-story. And within the text, one tale is the context for another within it; not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story; the inner story illuminates the outer as well. It often acts as a microcosmic replica for the whole text. In the forest when the Pāṇḍava brothers are in exile, the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira, is in the very slough of despondency: he has gambled away a kingdom, and is in exile. In the depth of his despair, a sage visits him and tells him the story of Nala. As the story unfolds, we see Nala too gamble away a kingdom, lose his wife, wander in the forest, and finally, win his wager, defeat his brother, reunite with his wife and return to his kingdom. Yudhiṣṭhira, following the full curve of Nala's adventures, sees that he is only halfway through his own, and sees his present in perspective, himself as a story yet to be finished. Very often the Nala story is excerpted and read by itself, but its poignancy is partly in its frame, its meaning for the hearer within the fiction and for the listener of the whole epic. The tale within is context-sensitive—getting its meaning from the tale without, and giving it further meanings.

Scholars have often discussed Indian texts (like the *Mahābhārata*) as if they were loose-leaf files, rag-bag encyclopaedias. Taking the Indian word for text, *grantha* (derived from the knot that holds the palm leaves together), literally, scholars often posit only an accidental and physical unity. We need to attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes (tale, discourse, poem, etc.) and materials. This manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the culture. Not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence seems to be the end.

Tamil (and Sanskrit) lyrics are all dramatic monologues; they imply the whole 'communication diagram': who said what to whom, when, why, and often with who else overhearing it. Here is an example:

WHAT HIS CONCUBINE SAID ABOUT HIM

(within earshot of the wife's friends, when she heard that the wife had said disparaging things about her)

You know he comes from
where the fresh-water sharks in the pools
catch with their mouths
the mangoes as they fall, ripe
from the trees on the edge of the field.

At our place
he talked big.

Now back in his own
when others raise their hands
and feet,
he will raise his too:

like a doll
in a mirror

he will shadow
every last wish
of his son's dear mother.

Kuruntokai, 8 (Ramanujan 1967, 22)

The colophons give us the following frames for this poem:

Genre: *Akam*, love poetry, the 'interior'.
Landscape: agricultural, with pool, fresh-water fish, mango trees.
Mood: infidelity, sullenness, lovers' quarrels.

The poetry of such a poem depends on a taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions—an ecosystem of which a man's activities and feelings are a part (see Ramanujan 1967 for details). To describe the exterior landscape is also to inscribe the interior landscape. What the man has, he is: the landscape which he owns, in which he lives (where sharks do not have to work for the mango, it falls into their open mouths) represents him: it is his *property*, in more senses than one. In Burke's (1946) terms, *scene* and *agent* are one; they are metonyms for one another.

The poem does not use a metaphor. The human agents are simply *placed* in the scene. Both parts of the comparison (the man and shark) are part of one scene, one syntagm; they exist separately, yet simulate each other. The Tamils call such a figure *ullurai* 'inward speaking'; it is an

'inset', an 'inscape'. In such a metonymic view of man in nature—man in context—he is continuous with the context he is in. In Peircean semiotic terms, these are not symbolic devices, but indexical signs—the signifier and the signified belong in the same context (Peirce 1931–58).

One might say, from this point of view, that Hindu ritual (e.g. Vedic sacrifice, or a coronation; see Inden [1978]) converts *symbols*, arbitrary signs (e.g. sacrificial horse), into *icons* where the signifier (the horse) is *like* what it signifies (the universe), and finally into *indexes*, where the signifier is *part* of what it signifies: the horse is the universe is Prajāpati, so that in sacrificing and partaking of it one is sacrificing and partaking of the universe itself (see the passage on the horse in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, adhyāya* 1, *brāhmaṇa* 1; Hume 1931, 73–4).

Neither in the Tamil poem nor in the upaniṣadic passages (e.g. the horse), does the Lévi-Straussian opposition of nature-culture make sense; we see that the opposition itself is culture-bound. There is another alternative to a culture vs. nature view: in the Tamil poems, culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture, so that we cannot tell the difference. We have a nature-culture continuum that cancels the terms, confuses them even if we begin with them.

Such container-contained relations are seen in many kinds of concepts and images: not only in culture-nature, but also god-world, king-kingdom, devotee-god, mother-child. Here is a *bhakti* poem which plays with many such concentric containments:

My dark one
    stands there as if nothing's changed,

after taking entire
into his maw
all three worlds
the gods
and the good kings
    who hold their lands
    as a mother would
    a child in her womb—

and I, by his leave,
have taken him entire

and I have him in my belly
for keeps.

    Nammāḻvār, 8.7.9 (Ramanujan 1980, 67)

Like the Nala story in the *Mahābhārata*, what is contained mirrors the container; the microcosm in both *within* and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it. Indian conceptions tend to be such concentric nests: the view of the 'sheaths' or *kosas*, the different 'bodies' or *kāyas* are examples (Egnor 1975). Such impressions are so strong and even kinesthetic that analysts tend to think in similar terms: one example is Dumont's notions of hierarchic encompassment, where each higher category or *jāti* encompasses all the earlier ones: the kṣatriya is distinct from but includes the vaiśya, as the brahman encompasses the kṣatriya (1970, sections 31, 34, 106, 118; appendices E, F). Many Indian lists, like *dharma-artha-kāma*, tend to be successive encompassments. (For the separation of *mokṣa*, see below.)

Even space and time, the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives, are in India not uniform and neutral, but have properties, varying specific densities, that affect those who dwell in them. The soil in a village, which produces crops for the people, affects their character (as liars, for instance, in E.V. Daniel's village [1984]); houses (containers par excellence) have mood and character, change the fortune and moods of the dwellers. Time too does not come in uniform units: certain hours of the day, certain days of the week, etc. are auspicious or inauspicious (*rāhukāla*); certain units of time (*yugas*) breed certain kinds of maladies, politics, religions (e.g. *kaliyuga*). A story is told about two men coming to Yudhiṣṭhira with a case. One had bought the other's land, and soon after found a crock of gold in it. He wanted to return it to the original owner of the land, who was arguing that it really belonged to the man who had now bought it. They had come to Yudhiṣṭhira to settle their virtuous dispute. Just then Yudhiṣṭhira was called away (to put it politely) for a while. When he came back the two gentlemen were quarrelling furiously, but each was claiming the treasure for himself this time! Yudhiṣṭhira realised at once that the age had changed, and *kaliyuga* had begun.

As hour, month, season, year, and aeon have their own properties as contexts, the arts that depend on time have to obey time's changing moods and properties. For instance, the *rāgas* of both north and south Indian classical music have their prescribed appropriate times. Like the Tamil poems, the genres and moods are associated with, placed in, hours of the day and times of the season. Even musical instruments have their caste properties; a *vīṇā*, no less than the icon of a god, has to be made by a particular caste, or family, after observing certain austerities (*vrata*), made on an auspicious day; the gourd from which it is made has to be taken from certain kinds of places. Their *guṇas* (qualities of substance) affect the quality of the instrument, the music.

The same kind of contextual sensitiveness is shown in medical

matters: in preparing an herbal medicine, in diagnosis and in prescription. As Zimmermann's work (1980) is eloquent on the subject, I shall say little. The notion of *ṛtusātmya* or appropriateness applies to poetry, music, sacrificial ritual as well as medicine. As Renou (1950a, 1950b) points out, *ṛtu*, usually translated as 'season', means articulation of time; it is also the crucial moment in Vedic sacrifice. *Ṛta* ('order', the original notion behind *dharma*) is that which is articulated. *Kratu*, sacrifice, is a convergence of events, acts, times and spaces. The vocabulary of *ṛtusātmya*, 'appropriateness', *rasa*, 'essences, flavours, tastes', *doṣa*, 'defects, deficiency', and of landscapes is common to both medicine and poetry: the arts of man reading and re-forming himself in his contexts.

Thus, all things, even so-called non-material ones like space and time or caste, affect other things because all things are 'substantial' (*dhātu*). The only difference is that some are subtle (*sūkṣma*), some gross (*sthūla*). Contrary to the notion that Indians are 'spiritual', they are really 'material minded'. They are materialists, believers in substance: there is a continuity, a constant flow (the etymology of *saṁsāra*!) of substance from context to object, from non-self to self (if you prefer)—in eating, breathing, sex, sensation, perception, thought, art or religious experience (Marriott 1976, 1980). This is the grain of truth glimpsed by many of the stereotypes cited in the earlier parts of this essay. Zimmermann (1979) points out that in Indian medical texts, the body is a meeting-place, a conjunction of elements, they have a physiology, but no anatomy.

Where Kissinger and others are wrong is in not seeing that this view has nothing to do with the Newtonian revolution, education, or (in)capacity for abstract thought. Cognitive anthropologists like Richard Shweder (1972) have studied descriptive phrases used by highly intelligent Oriya and American adults and shown that they describe persons very differently: Americans characterised them with generic words like 'good', 'nice', Oriyas with concrete contextual descriptions like 'he brings sweets'. The psychoanalyst Alan Roland (1979) suggests that Indians carry their family-context wherever they go, feel continuous with their family. He posits a familial self, a 'self-we regard', sees no phase of separation/individuation from the parental family as in modern America; hence there seems to be no clear-cut adolescent phase through which one rebels, and thereby separates and individuates oneself in opposition to one's family (the exceptions are in 'modern' urban-centred families). Roland remarks that Indians develop a 'radar' *conscience* that orients them to others, makes them say things that are appropriate to person and context. (No wonder Max Müller had to insist that Indians were truthful!)

Roland also found that when directions to places are given, Indians always make reference to other places, landmarks.

Such a pervasive emphasis on context is, I think, related to the Hindu concern with *jāti*—the logic of classes, of genera and species, of which human *jātis* are only an instance. Various taxonomies of season, landscape, times, *guṇas* or qualities (and their material bases), tastes, characters, emotions, essences (*rasa*), etc., are basic to the thought-work of Hindu medicine and poetry, cooking and religion, erotics and magic. Each *jāti* or class defines a context, a structure of relevance, a rule of permissible combinations, a frame of reference, a meta-communication of what is and can be done.

It is not surprising that systems of Indian philosophy, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain,

> confine themselves to the consideration of class-essences (*jāti*) called genera and species in Western philosophy. They never raise the question of whether there are universals of other types, namely identical qualities and relations. The assumption seems to be that qualities and relations are particulars, though they may be instances of universals. (Dravid 1972, 347)

The most important and accessible model of a context-sensitive system with intersecting taxonomies is, of course, the grammar of a language. And grammar is the central model for thinking in many Hindu texts. As Frits Staal has said, what Euclid is to European thought, the grammarian Pāṇini is to the Indian. Even the Kāmasūtra is literally a grammar of love—which declines and conjugates men and women as one would nouns and verbs in different genders, voices, moods and aspects. Genders are genres. Different body-types and character-types obey different rules, respond to different scents and beckonings.

In such a world, systems of meaning are elicited by contexts, by the nature (and substance) of the listener. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, adhyāya* 5, *brāhmaṇa* 2, Lord Prajāpati speaks in thunder three times: 'DA DA DA'. When the gods, given to pleasure hear it, they hear it as the first syllable of *damayatā*, 'control'. The antigods, given as they are to cruelty, hear it as *dayādhavam*, 'be compassionate'. When the humans, given to greed, hear it they hear it as *dattā*, 'give to others' (Hume 1931, 150).

V

All societies have context-sensitive behaviour and rules—but the dominant ideal may not be the 'context-sensitive' but the 'context-free'.

Egalitarian democratic ideals, Protestant Christianity, espouse both the universal and the unique, insist that any member is *equal* to and *like* any other in the group. Whatever his context—birth, class, gender, age, place, rank, etc.—a man is a man for all that. Technology with its modules and inter-changeable parts, and the post-Renaissance sciences with their quest for universal laws (and 'facts') across contexts intensify the bias towards the context-free. Yet societies have underbellies. In predominantly 'context-free' societies, the counter-movements tend to be towards the context-sensitive: situation ethics, Wittgensteinian notions of meaning and colour (against class-logic), the various relativisms including our own search for 'native categories' in anthropology, holistic movements in medicine (naturopaths who prescribe individually-tailored regimens) are good examples. In 'traditional' cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. So *rasa* in aesthetics, *mokṣa* in the 'aims of life', *sannyāsa* in the life-stages, *sphoṭa* in semantics, and *bhakti* in religion define themselves against a background of inexorable contextuality.

Where *kāma, artha* and *dharma* are all relational in their values, tied to place, time, personal character and social role, *mokṣa* is the release from all relations. If *brahmacārya* (celibate studentship) is preparation for a fully relational life, *grahasthāśrama* (the householder stage) is a full realisation of it. Manu prefers the latter over all other states. *Vānaprastha* (the retiring forest-dweller stage) loosens the bonds, and *sannyāsa* (renunciation) cremates all one's past and present relations. In the realm of feeling, *bhāvas* are private, contingent, context-roused sentiments, *vibhāvas* are determinant causes, *anubhāvas* the consequent expressions. But *rasa* is generalised, it is an essence. In the field of meaning, the temporal sequence of letters and phonemes, the syntactic chain of words, yields finally a *sphoṭa*, an explosion, a meaning which is beyond sequence and time. In each of these the pattern is the same: a necessary sequence in time with strict rules of phase and context ends in a free state.

The last of the great Hindu anti-contextual notions, *bhakti*, is different from the above; it denies the very need for context. *Bhakti* defies all contextual structures: every pigeonhole of caste, ritual, gender, appropriate clothing and custom, stage of life, the whole system of *Homo hierarchicus* ('everything in its place') is the target of its irony.

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?
Or did the master's breath
wear sacred thread?

Did the outcaste, last in line,
hold with his outgoing breath
the stick of his tribe?

What do the fools of this world know
of the snares you set,
O Rāmanātha?

Dāsimayya, 96 (Ramanujan 1973, 105)

In European culture, one might mention Plato's rebellion against (even the limited) Athenian democracy. Or Blake in the technocratic democracy of the nineteenth century railing against egalitarianism, abstraction, and the dark Satanic mills, calling for 'minute particulars', declaring 'To generalise is to be an idiot' (generalising thereby); and forming the slogan of all context-sensitive systems: 'one law for the lion and the ox is oppression'. I would include the rise of minute realism in the nineteenth-century novel and various 'indexical' movements of modern art in this counter-thrust towards particularism in the West.

Neither the unique, nor the universal, the two, often contradictory, concerns of Western philosophy, art and polity, are the central concern of the Indian arts and sciences—except in the counter-cultures and in modern attempts, which quickly get enlisted and remoulded (witness the fate of *bhakti* movements) by the prevailing context-sensitive patterns.

VI

In conclusion, I would like to make a couple of observations about 'modernisation'. One might see 'modernisation' in India as a movement from the context-sensitive to the context-free in all realms: an erosion of contexts, at least in principle. Gandhi's watch (with its uniform autonomous time, governing his punctuality) replaced the almanac. Yet Gandhi quoted Emerson, that consistency was the hobgoblin of foolish minds. Print replaced palm-leaf manuscripts, making possible an open and egalitarian access to knowledge irrespective of caste. The Indian Constitution made the contexts of birth, region, sex and creed irrelevant, overthrowing Manu, though the battle is joined again and again. The new preferred names give no clue to birth-place, father's name, caste, sub-caste and sect, as all the traditional names did: I once found in a Kerala college roster, three 'Joseph Stalins' and one 'Karl Marx'. I have also heard of an Andhra named 'Bobbili Winston Churchill'.

In music, the *rāgas* can now be heard at all hours and seasons. Once the *Venkateśasuprabhātam*, the wake-up chant for the Lord of Tirupati,

could be heard only in Tirupati at a certain hour in the morning. Since M.S. Subbulakshmi in her devotion cut a record of the chants, it wakes up not only the Lord, but anyone who tunes in to All India Radio in faraway places.

Cultural borrowings from India to the West, or vice versa, also show interesting accommodations to the prevailing system. The highly contextualised Hindu systems are generalised into 'a Hindu view of life' by apologues like Radhakrishnan for the benefit of both Western and modern Indian readers. The individual esoteric skills of meditation are freed from their contexts into a streamlined, widely accessible technique. And when T.S. Eliot borrows the DA DA DA passage (quoted earlier) to end 'The Waste Land' (1922), it becomes highly individual, introspective, as well as universal.

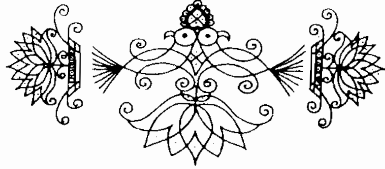
In reverse, Indian borrowings of Western cultural items have been converted and realigned to fit pre-existing context-sensitive needs. When English is borrowed into (or imposed on) Indian contexts, it fits into the Sanskrit slot; it acquires many of the characteristics of Sanskrit, the older native father tongue, its pan-Indian elite character—as a medium of laws, science and administration, and its formulaic patterns; it becomes part of Indian multiple diglossia (a characteristic of context-sensitive societies). When Indians learn, quite expertly, modern science, business, or technology, they 'compartmentalise' these interests (Singer 1972: 320ff.); the new ways of thought and behaviour do not replace, but live along with older 'religious' ways. Computers and typewriters receive *ayudhapuja* ('worship of weapons') as weapons of war once did. The 'modern', the context-free, becomes one more context, though it is not easy to contain.

In modern thought, William James with his 'sub-universes', or Alfred Schutz with his 'finite provinces of reality' and 'relevance' as central concepts in any understanding, should be re-read in the light of what I have said about context-sensitive and context-free modes. The most recent kinds of science can hold together inconsistent systems of explanation—like wave and particle theories of light. The counter-movements in the West toward Schumacher's 'small is beautiful', appropriate technologies, and the attention paid to ethnicity rather than to a melting pot, though not yet successful, are straws in the wind—like the ethnography of communication in linguistics.

My purpose here is not to evaluate but to grope toward a description of the two kinds of emphases. Yet in each of these kinds of cultures, despite all the complexity and oscillation, there is a definite bias. The Buddha

(who said, 'When we see a man shot with a poisoned arrow, we cannot afford to ask what caste he or his enemy is') also told the following parable of the raft. Once a man was drowning in a sudden flood. Just as he was about to drown, he found a raft. He clung to it, and it carried him safely to dry land. And he was so grateful to the raft that he carried it on his back for the rest of his life. Such was the Buddha's ironic comment on context-free systems.

Towards an Anthology of City Images



INTRODUCTION

The concern of the present paper is to present certain relations of social science to literature, by example rather than by theoretical discussion. The paper has three sections: the first, a 'random reader' of brief and general city images, sampling different kinds of literary sources; the second, a close look at three descriptions of particular ancient cities in Sanskrit and in Tamil, with their sociological characteristics related to their literary functions; and the third, a brief, frankly speculative section regarding the City/Country/Jungle contrasts or their absence as reflected in the literary quality of Sanskrit and Tamil poetry.

The basic assumptions of this paper may be summarised briefly at the outset. Literature may provide facts for social scientists, especially in the absence of other documents. But literature refracts as much as it reflects; one needs to take account of the 'specific density' of the literary medium, its 'refractive index', before we can truly use literary materials as documents. To use them in a literal straightforward fashion is to misuse them, or use them only to illustrate what we know already through other means. The special contribution of literature is its vision, its intuitive grasp of structure, its perspective; not the facts themselves so viewed, but the facts as seen by the imaginative accuracy of a mind that is not merely factual. Therefore, any use of literary examples to illustrate simply, say, overcrowding in cities or the slum problem or modernisation is no use at all, for we bring our categories to it and take them out again, with no new insights gained from the give-and-take. Unless we enter the realm of the symbolic values that writers express through the 'facts' and 'objective entities', the facts themselves would be commonplace or

misunderstood. Literature provides patterns and hypotheses directly relevant to social science. It provides a repertoire of perceptions otherwise not available, or perceptions that social scientists reach only after infinite pains and fact-finding. William Blake said, 'Whatever is proven today was once imagined'.

Literature is an excellent place to go to for 'the image of a city' in Kevin Lynch's sense: the look of a city, its 'identity, structure and meaning', how it feels to live in it, the atmosphere and ambience that urban planners and sociologists have begun to be deeply concerned about. A whole study is yet to be done in this field, interpreting the images of cities, the informing sense of orientation that differs from culture to culture. For instance, 'certain holy areas may become very highly charged, so that there is a strong focusing of attention, a fine differentiation of parts, a high density of names.' Sometimes the best focused image of a city is the literary one, sensitive to both structural design and the significance of detail. Such, in brief, are the assumptions that underlie the discussion of actual examples that follow.

I. A 'RANDOM READER' OF CITY IMAGES

Proverbs succinctly and pointedly summarise characteristic attitudes towards a city. Usually the city is not treated in itself, but as one member of a paradigm of city/country, sometimes of city/village/jungle. Here are a few samples from Kannada proverbs from my field-notes. The first describes the premodern city in its two dimensions, the physical and the social. Cities are built near a water-source and ruled by a king.

a. Complain till you reach the king,
run till you reach the river.

The king is the ultimate authority, the river is the last boundary.

b. If a woman comes to town (*ūru*, town or village),
won't she come for the water?

Whoever comes to town (or village) has to come to the single water-source, river or lake or city well, where women meet and exchange gossip. McLuhan once observed,

In India . . . when they tried to put in running water, it pulled the village women away from the well. This destroyed community life. They had to remove the pipes. You cannot put running water into an aural community without distressful circumstances. (Stern 1967, 52)

Though this is true to some extent in large Indian cities, many of the poorer localities and the smaller cities still use the well as a ritual or a practical water-source. Where pipelines are present in cities like Maturai, the street pump may replace the well as the agora for the gossips of the neighbourhood.

c. Only torches light the village.

This implies a contrast with city lights, which have always symbolised the fascination (and probably the amenities, and earlier, even the safety) of the city. The glaring, uncertain and uneven lighting of village streets is set off against the steady lamps of the city. The difference in the lights also symbolically refers to the state of civilisation, one uncertain and hand-to-mouth, the other regulated and reliable. According to Binode Bihari Dutt, the Smṛti Śāstras enjoin lighting lamps at the crossroads (Dutt 1925, 135). Iḷanko Aṭikaḷ in *Cilappatikāram* describes the ancient city of Pukār: 'The lamps gave such abundant light that one could have found a single mustard seed had it fallen on the clean sand, spread evenly like fine flour' (Danielou 1965, 30).

The next two proverbs speak of the city as a marketplace, a settlement started by tradesmen, and of the immigration of people in search of fortune.

d. Wherever a Seṭṭi (merchant) settles you have a city.

The word for city here is *paṭṭaṇa*, which means particularly a mofussil market-town, though in some regions like Tamilnad a *paṭṭinan* is a coastal town. Pukār was also named Kāvirippūmpaṭṭinam in *Cilappatikāram* (Danielou 1965, 19).

e. When you're ruined you go to the city.

Here too the word for city, significantly, is *paṭṭaṇa*, a mercantile town where you may find the fortune you lost elsewhere. The proverb is also used ironically, in the sense that 'unless you're ruined, you'll never have to go to the city; it's the place for the corrupt and the reckless'.

The folklore of village and city might also give a clue to changes of attitude if we can observe changes of meaning and context in the use of the proverbs and tales. At this distance I could not find any Indian example as interesting as the American one: the folk saying, 'You can take a boy out of the country but not the country out of the boy', has become the model for a cigarette ad, 'You can take Salem out of the country but you can't take the country out of Salem'. In this use of the proverb, the meaning of 'country' has shifted from a pejorative or even neutral use of the word to a favourable use, idealised, idyllic and green in the smog-dimmed eyes of the city man; the visual contrasts (in the TV commercial) between cityscape and leafy country emphasise this change of attitude toward the countryside.

Nor could I find a folktale parallel to the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse in South Indian oral literature (the tale is sometimes found in recent schoolbooks); but the tale goes back in Europe to at least the time of Aesop (sixth century BC). No index of folktales or motifs lists an Indian parallel. Such an absence itself is interesting, though the gap might very well be ascribed to absence of data. Nor do we find in the early literatures a line like William Cowper's 'God made the country and man made the town' (and the devil made the small town?). The European polarisation of city and country present in various forms in European literatures is not as marked in either early Sanskrit or Tamil literatures—though epic and classical Sanskrit, the later Sanskrit-derived regional writings, and certainly modern writings present the polarity. Like Dr Johnson in eighteenth-century urban England, who believed that civilisation ends with the turnpikes of London, Vātsyāyana (author of the *Kāmasūtra*) 'seems to despise village-life and extol city-life which in his opinion was the only kind of life that was worth having' (Ray 1964, 51). Obviously a change had taken place in regard to cities since the time of the sacerdotal brahmanical texts which do not refer much to cities, and do not look upon them with favour. 'Baudhāyana goes so far as to warn people desirous of spiritual growth against residence in cities. In one place he states clearly it is impossible for one to obtain salvation, who lives in a town covered with dust' (Ray 1964, 51).

Such a view of the city as corrupt and uncongenial to pursuits of the spirit is more in tune with some modern writing:

> Snake, you were never civilized,
> And you never learned
> to live in the city.
> I'd like to ask—(if you'll answer)—
> How, then did you learn to bite—
> Where did you get the poison?
>
> S.H. Vatsyayan (modern Hindi)

Shelley, the English Romantic poet, said, 'Hell is a city very much like London.' The following excerpt from a modern Marathi poem by B.S. Mardhekar projects the vision (or cliché) of the modern city dweller's city, the city as nightmare, its crowds, its faceless anomie, its clock-bound materialism; even the biological metaphor of the anthill is

specially modern. Premodern ants were extolled for their industry, not denigrated.

I am an ant,
He is an ant, you are an ant, she is an ant,
A handful are foreign, a handful native;
A thousand have crowded, a million, a billion,
Trillions and trillions of ants;
Innumerable uncountable all have crowded here,
Many from the anthills, many others fugitive!
Some are fat and black, some red, some white;
Some are the winged ants of the monsoon,
Some are the big bold ones of summer!
Some are careful and walk in a file;
Some are silly and eat sugar wherever they find it;
Some stick and sting;
Some live feeding honey to others;
And some fertilize the Queen,
Smart enough to please!
Who will usurp
All these ants
One by one
To become King?
Who will carry
The summa of matter
To the spiritual realm?
Ants, ants, cheaper by the dozen, ants for sale . . .
This flood of ants comes, open the gates!
The suburban train
Of ten past ten
Has arrived emptying its sigh. . . .

B.S. Mardhekar (modern Marathi)

The alienation that the English language and Western education have brought to the urban intelligentsia with some form of English as the lingua-franca of the cosmopolitan city, living in two worlds, one Indian, the other symbolised by Cezanne, is well expressed by the following poem, written by a poet who writes only in English.

Always, in the sun's eye,
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time,
I ride my elephant of thought,
A Cezanne slung around my neck.

Nissim Ezekiel (Indian English)

The city may be the nightmare of the citydweller; it is still the dream of the villager as seen in the following Tamil folk-poem, which sees the wonders of the modern city, like airplanes, telegraphy and electricity, in curiously village-terms:

Look, look a cart in the sky
Without bullocks!
Look, it talks like a parrot,
this white man's wire!

On top of the court
look, how it burns—
that light of lights!
The white man's light!

Looking at the city
my belly forgets its hunger—
going round and round
my village, my heart

is not there:
it can see nothing!

Vānamāmalai (modern Tamil)

In classical Sanskrit, every *kāvya* (courtly poetry or poetic prose narrative) had to have 'eighteen kinds of descriptions', which included sunrise, the sea, the rains and similar set pieces. One of the most important among these was the hero's jaunt through the city. The convention was later adopted in all the Sanskrit-influenced medieval literatures of India. So every *kāvya* had to include the description of a city, and the cities in widely different *kāvyas* tended to look alike. In the next section we shall speak in detail about Ayodhyā, the city in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, 'the first of *kāvyas*'.

For an 'idealized rather than conventional' description of a city in a Bengali *Maṅgala Kāvya*, see Dimock and Inden (1968). The passage is

too long to quote in this paper, so I shall content myself with a shorter description from the *Vidyā-Sundara* of Bhāratcandra (Bengali, eighteenth century):

The prince went past the prison-ground and saw before him the palace of the king. All round were people of the thirty-six castes, and people of all nations involved in their particular businesses. There were markets with passageways and alleys and bazaars, with crowds surging in and out, thousands of people, and rut elephants, their trunks swinging, tied to pillars, and horses and camels and asses and mules brought from Turkey, Iraq, and Arabia. There were all kinds of people and birds and beasts which inhabit the earth. And who could number them all? In one part was a circle of brahmans, reciting the Vedas, expounding philosophy and rhetoric and logic and the smṛtis and grammar. From every house came the sounds of the conchshell and sounds of the worship of Śiva and Caṇḍi, the sounds of sacrifice and celebration. In another section there were Vaidyas, feeling pulses and purging illness with Ayurvedic medicine. There were businessmen of Kāyastha and other castes selling flutes and jewels and perfume and brass and gold; there were coppersmiths, makers of ornaments from conchshells, and wood-sellers; there were cowherds and milk-men and oilmen and weavers and flower-sellers and barbers and betel sellers and blacksmiths and potters and women of the town and farmers and washermen from the country gawking, and fishermen, and how many others I cannot begin to tell.

Gazing at this teeming city, Sundar exclaimed in amazement. And then, to one side, he caught sight of a beautiful lake, with four paved ghāṭs and four temples of the lord Śiva. On the ghāṭs there were lines of ascetics with matted hair, their bodies smeared with ashes. And in another quarter, by the lake, he saw a lovely garden of flowers. In this garden the wind was gently wafting the sweet scent of sandalwood, the nightingales were calling softly, the bees were humming. The water of the lake was lapping quietly, and on the water graceful waterbirds swam and there were white and red and blue and yellow lotuses and lilies of all kinds. Peacocks were dancing and calling in the garden, and cranes and swans. In the forest of flowers the birds, awake both day and night, sang sweetly. It was the garden of the palace of the king. Surely this was the earth's finest city, a place where the god of love himself might come to rest. (Dimock 1963)

It is not surprising, however, that Sanskrit should have many descriptions of cities. For Sanskrit is an urban-centred but non-regional language, as Urdu later was and English now is. These three languages naturally carry many city images; modern Marathi and Bengali have some city literature, though for a different reason—that the two 'megapolises' of India, Bombay and Calcutta, are in Maharashtra and Bengal. Urdu especially has a unique genre called *shahr-i-ashob*, 'poems on the ruined city', lamenting the decay and corruption of a city like Delhi in the

eighteenth century. There are excellent examples of *shahr-i-ashob* in Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam's *Three Mughal Poets*. The following is a passage from the book:

How can I describe the desolation of Delhi? There is no house from where the jackal's cry cannot be heard. The mosques at evening are unlit and deserted, and only in one house in a hundred will you see a light burning. Its citizens do not possess even the essential cooking pots, and vermin crawl in the places where in former days men used to welcome the coming of spring with music and rejoicing. The lovely buildings which once made the famished man forget his hunger are in ruins now. In the once-beautiful gardens where the nightingale sang his love songs to the rose, the grass grows waist-high around the fallen pillars and ruined arches. In the villages round about, the young women no longer come to draw water at the wells and stand talking in the leafy shade of the trees. The villages are deserted, the trees themselves are gone, and the wells are full of corpses. Jahānābād, you never deserved this terrible fate, you who were once vibrant with life and love and hope, like the heart of a young lover, you for whom men afloat upon the ocean of the world once set their course as to the promised shore, you from whose dust men came to gather pearls. Not even a lamp of clay now burns where once the chandelier blazed with light. Those who once lived in great mansions now eke out their lives among the ruins. Thousands of hearts once full of hope are sunk in despair. Women of noble birth, veiled from head to foot, stand in the streets carrying in their arms their little children, lovely as fresh flowers; they are ashamed to beg outright, and offer for sale rosaries made from the holy clay of Karbala. (Saudā, eighteenth-century Urdu; Russell and Islam 1968, 67–8)

II. THREE CITIES

In this section we will take a close look at the pictures of three cities, Ayodhyā, Pukār, and Maturai; the first is from the Sanskrit epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, the latter two from the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* of Iḷaṅko Aṭikaḷ (circa fifth century).

King Dasaratha's kingdom and capital:

The earth consisting of seven islands has been under one ruler since the time of those kings descended from Manu,[1] who were ever victorious. Among those mighty monarchs was Sagara followed by his sixty thousand sons who hollowed out the ocean. This classic Ramayana contains the history of the House of Sagara, founded by Ikshwaku. This Rama-Katha[2] will be recited from beginning to end—let all listen to it with faith.

On the banks of the river Sarayu, there was a great and prosperous country named Koshala, inhabited by contented people. In it was the city of Ayodhya, famous in the three worlds, founded by the renowned Manu, a lord among men. The city's thoroughfares extended for sixty miles; its beauty was enhanced by

streets admirably planned, the principal highways being sprinkled with water and strewn with flowers.

King Dasaratha protected the city as Maghavan[3] protects Amaravati. He dwelt there in splendour, as Indra in heaven. The city had beautiful and massive gates and charming markets; its fortifications were planned by skilful engineers and artificers. There were bards, ballad singers and public musicians in the city; the inhabitants were wealthy and had spacious houses with high arched porticos, decorated with flags and banners. It was filled with extensive buildings and beautiful gardens, and surrounded by mango groves, tall trees enhancing the outskirts of the city, giving it the appearance of a beautiful girl wearing a girdle of greenery. The city was enclosed by strong fortifications and a deep moat which no enemy, by any expedient whatsoever, could penetrate. Countless elephants, horses, cattle, camels and mules were to be seen in the city. Innumerable ambassadors and merchants dwelt there and people from many lands traded peacefully within its walls.

Ayodhya, like Indra's Amaravati,[4] was resplendent with gilded palaces, the walls of which were set with precious stones, the domes resembling mountain peaks. Gem-encrusted, sky-kissing buildings could be seen throughout the royal capital. Dwelling houses, tall and fair, stood in well-placed sites and resounded with delightful music. There were lovely dwellings occupied by men of noble birth, resembling the aerial chariots that carry those of pure life and spiritual perfection to heaven.

The warriors living in that city were of those who do not slay a fleeing foe, they were skilled archers, able to pierce a target by sound alone. Many had slain tigers, lions and wolves wandering near their homes, either in single combat or with different kinds of weapons. This great city which harboured thousands of chieftains was built[5] by King Dasaratha.

In Ayodhya lived countless learned men engaged in the observance of rituals, there were also artists and craftsmen, men deeply read in the Veda and those endowed with every virtue, full of truth and wisdom, as well as thousands of seers and sages versed in the mystical science of Yoga. (Shastri 1952)

The next chapter continues the description of the city of Ayodhyā:

The people in that city were happy, virtuous, learned, experienced, each satisfied with his state, practising his own calling, without avarice and of truthful speech. None was indigent or dwelt in a mean habitation; all lived happily with their families, possessing wealth, grain, cattle and horses. In that city of Ayodhya, none was a miser or a swindler, none was mean-spirited, proud, rash, worthless or an atheist. Men and women were of righteous conduct, fully self-controlled, and in their pure and chaste behaviour they equalled the great sages. None lacked earrings, coronets and necklaces. They bathed daily and rubbed their bodies with oil, using attar of roses and sandal paste. None ate impure food, none allowed his neighbour to suffer hunger. All possessed ornaments and gold, and there was

none who had not learnt to subdue his mind. No one in the city neglected to offer butter and fragrant objects in the sacrificial fire. No one was mean, impious or failed to discharge his duties; there were no thieves and none were born of mixed castes.

The brahmans were devoted to their respective duties, firm in self-control and authorized to accept gifts. None denied the existence of God, none uttered falsehood or were enamoured of worldly pleasure and none was guilty of slander. No brahman was unversed in the six systems of philosophy nor did any neglect to fast at the full moon, or on other appointed days; there were none who suffered from mental or physical infirmities and none were unhappy in that city.

Among the inhabitants, there were no revolutionaries and none who were not loyal to king and state. Those who dwelt there worshipped the gods and the uninvited guest; they were both magnanimous and charitable.

All attained a ripe age as virtuous and truth-loving people; their homes were filled with children, grandchildren and virtuous women. The warriors were subject to the learned brahmans and the merchants to the warrior caste; in accordance with their caste the people served the brahmans, the warriors and the merchants.

In the administration of the empire, the Emperor Dasaratha followed the example of the first ruler Manu who was supreme in wisdom and a god among men.

Ayodhya abounded in warriors, undefeated in battle, fearless and skillful in the use of arms, resembling lions guarding their mountain caves.

There were horses in the city from Kamroja, Vanaya, Nudi and Vahli, and elephants from the regions of Vindhu and Himavat.

The city of Ayodhya was full of courageous and noble men belonging to the races of Bhadra, Mulla and Mriga, inhabitants of the regions of Vindhyachala and the Himalayan ranges.

The city possessed mighty elephants like great hills. The capital was truly worthy of the name 'Ayodhya', which means 'The City none can challenge in warfare'. (Shastri 1952, 17–20)

The description of Ayodhyā with its gem-encrusted sky-kissing buildings appears obviously conventional and idealised, yielding no 'facts' as such for the social scientists, unlike a description in a modern realistic novel. Yet it presents the details of what an ideal city should look like, and describes by negation something of what real cities contained. The well-planned city matches the moral order and well-preserved hierarchy of the society it houses. Furthermore, we must remember that Ayodhyā and its moral order is symbolic of Rāma himself, a god descended to right all wrongs; it is in fact identified with the perfect hero. Rāma is born into Ayodhyā, exiled from it, and returns to it after conquering Rāvaṇa who had disturbed the peace of gods and men, as well as Rāma's own life by abducting Sītā. In Kenneth Burke's terms, it is a Scene-Agent

ratio, a synecdoche: the Scene (Ayodhyā) and the Agent (Rāma) are one (Burke 1962, 7). At another level, it represents the perfect scene before it is broken by the stepmother's request, the exile of Rāma and the death of Daśaratha. The idealisation therefore has important literary functions.

On the other hand, the ideal picture shows an extraordinary structural grasp of the realities of a city. For instance, the details of Vālmīki's Ayodhyā, at first glance an unreal fiction, happen to fit the criteria of Gordon Childe and others, based on descriptions of known ancient cities deducible from archaeological data (Childe 1950; for a succinct discussion of Childe's criteria, see Jones 1966, 19–20).

1. The cities were larger, more extensive, more densely populated than any previous settlements: Ayodhyā's thoroughfares extended for sixty miles; the density of buildings, livestock, and human inhabitants is constantly emphasised in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.
2. The city had a different function from a village; large classes of non-agricultural specialists are mentioned for Ayodhyā.
3. The city depends on the accumulation of capital based on the surplus collected from the primary producers: 'Wealth, grain, cattle, and horses.'
4. This 'accumulation was symbolized by a monumental structure or public building' (Jones 1966, 20), presumably Daśaratha's palace, though it is not explicitly described here.
5. A class structure, 'Priests and leaders absorbed most of the surplus, and in exchange arranged the entire routine of life and death' (Jones 1966, 20). The chapters that follow our excerpts describe in detail Daśaratha's counsellors and the great sacrifice (for the birth of a son) they help him perform. The excerpt itself has many references to the rigorously observed hierarchy.
6. 'The recording of the surplus, the measurement of the year, and writing' (Jones 1966, 20). 'In Ayodhyā lived countless learned men engaged in the observance of rituals', and rituals are set in a calendar, e.g., 'to fast at the full moon or other appointed days'. The development of arithmetic, astronomy and geometry that Childe refers to, are indirectly attested by the calendrical festivals and by the town-planning. For instance, Ayodhyā is described as an 'octagonal chessboard' (*aṣṭāpadākāra*).
7. A new direction was given to artistic expression. The description includes not only 'engineers and artificers', but also 'bards, ballad singers and public musicians' (compare with the description of Pukār and Maturai below).
8. 'Lastly, trade was a characteristic of all these urban civilizations, and consequently the manufacturer could become an integral part of this new community, his allegiance being transferred to the city, rather than residing soley in kin relationships' (Jones 1966, 20). The identification of Rāma with Ayodhyā, and the citizens with their city, their lamenting his departure from it as bringing disaster to it and themselves, is one of the themes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (also see below, description of Pukār). Later, when Rāma's minion, Hanumān, goes to Laṅkā, the enemy's island city, he first fights with Laṅkā, a spirit who says, 'I am the city of Laṅkā.' Such guardian spirits of cities express, among other things, a conception of the unique and unified character of a city with a 'spirit of place' all its own.

There are other characteristics of Ayodhyā noticed by Vālmīki which call for anthropological comment. Redfield and Singer, in their paper 'The Cultural Role of Cities', distinguish two types of cities: the orthogenetic and the heterogenetic, the former 'carrying forward into systematic and reflective dimensions an old culture', the latter 'creating . . . original modes of thought that have authority beyond or in conflict with old cultures and civilizations' (Redfield and Singer 1954, 169). Though 'cities are both these things', 'the predominating trend may be in one of the two directions'. We may summarily list here the main characteristics that Redfield and Singer set down. For qualifications and further details, the reader should consult the paper itself.

The orthogenetic city is a city of the moral order. Ayodhyā is a supreme symbol of the ideal moral order both in the *Rāmāyaṇa* text and afterwards in Hindu culture. Its so-called unrealistic perfection of arrangements, both physical and social, has the symbolic function of projecting a metaphysical order. The contrast will become clear when we see Pukār as a good example of the heterogenetic city, the city of technical order.

Ayodhyā represents 'a phase of primary urbanization' that tends to 'occur slowly in communities not radically disturbed, tends to produce a "sacred culture" which is gradually transmuted by the literati of the cities into a "great tradition" ' (Redfield and Singer 1954, 174). Sacred scripture and a sacred class to interpret it are also concomitants. The emphasis is not on the presence of different cultures and races, though they are mentioned rather vaguely as living in peace within its walls, like the horses and the elephants brought over from distant places. Cultural homogeneity, controlled by traditional systems of law and order, role and status, characterises Ayodhyā. The warriors did not slay a fleeing foe, everyone bathed daily, none ate impure food, no one neglected to offer butter and fragrant objects in the sacrificial fire. Brahman, warrior, and merchant perfectly fulfilled their roles in the hierarchy. The moral order is not expressed as imposed from without, but internal to each citizen, the very stereotype of the inner-directed: there was none who had not learnt to subdue his mind.

Vālmīki's description anticipates in surprising ways even some of the details of the Redfield-Singer picture of an orthogenetic city. Cities with much orthogenetic character, like early Philadelphia, 'were established by purposive acts of founders' (173), as Ayodhyā was by Manu. 'The stereotype of the "wicked" city will be stronger in the hinterlands of the heterogenetic cities than in those of orthogenetic cities.' Compare Ayodhyā with the Delhi of Saudā (see above). Ayodhyā expressed magnificently the consciousness of a single cultural universe. Furthermore, there is no possibility of subversion and heresy; Vālmīki explicitly mentions that there were no atheists, no thieves, and none born of mixed castes. Such deviants are the denizens of the heterogenetic city.

The next two cities will make the contrast clearer. They are two of the three cities depicted in the *Cilappatikāram*. Kovalan̲, a rich merchant, is a respected citizen of Pukār or Kāvirippūmpaṭṭinam, a trading city on the coast. Observe the contrasts between Pukār and Maturai to which Kovalan̲ travels after being rendered bankrupt by his affair with a beautiful courtesan in Pukār. In Maturai, the bastioned capital of the Pāndya kings, he is killed through the treachery of a dishonest goldsmith. Ayodhyā, Pūkar and Maturai are vivid contrasts to each other, in city type and in literary detail as well as in symbolic function. This is Pukār:

The riches of the Pukār shipowners made the kings of faraway lands envious. The most costly merchandise, the rarest foreign produce, reached the city by sea and caravans. Such was the abundance that, had all the world's inhabitants been assembled within the city walls, the stocks would have lasted for many years. The city spread wide, vast as the capital of the northern Kuru—beyond the Gandhara country—where dwell sages famous for their asceticism. Puhār was unrivaled for the pleasures it afforded and for the rare magnificence of its noble citizens, such as lotus-eyed Kannaki and her tender husband Kovalan, cultivated and endowed with inexhaustible wealth. (Danielou 1965, 6)

The sunshine lighted up the open terraces, the harbour docks, the towers with their loopholes like the eyes of deer. In various quarters of the city the homes of wealthy Greeks were seen. Near the harbour seamen from far-off lands appeared at home. In the streets hawkers were selling unguents, bath powders, cooling oils, flowers, perfume, incense. Weavers brought their fine silks and all kinds of fabrics made of wool or cotton. There were special streets for merchants of coral, sandalwood, myrrh, jewellery, faultless pearls, pure gold and precious gems.

In another quarter lived grain merchants, their stocks piled up in mounds. Washermen, bakers, vintners, fishermen, and dealers in salt crowded the shops, where they bought betel nuts, perfume, sheep, oil, meat, and bronzes. One could see coppersmiths, carpenters, goldsmiths, tailors, shoemakers, and clever craftsmen making toys out of cork or rags; and musicians, expert in each branch of the art, who demonstrated their mastery in the seven-tone scale on the flute and the harp. Workmen displayed their skills in hundreds of small crafts. Each trade had its own street in the workers' quarter of the city.

At the center of the city were the wide royal streets, the street of temple cars, the bazaar, and the main street, where rich merchants had their mansions with high towers. There was a street for priests, one for doctors, one for astrologers, one for peasants. In a wide passage lived the craftsmen who pierce gems and pearls for the jewellers. Nearby were those who make trinkets out of polished nacre and sea shells. In another quarter lived the coachmen, bards, dancers, astronomers, clowns, prostitutes, actresses, florists, betel-sellers, servants, oboe players, drummers, jugglers and acrobats.

In wide fields near the town were encamped horsemen and their swift mounts, war elephants, chariot drivers, soldiers fearful to look upon. Near these were palaces of knights and princes. Between the quarters of the workers and the nobles lay an open square, large as a battlefield where two great armies might have met. There, under rows of trees, the sheds of a market were set up. The haggling of buyers and sellers could be heard there all day long. (Danielou 1965, 18–19)

The king of Vacciranadu, whose empire extends eastward to the boisterous seas, offered him (King of Puhār) as tribute a dais studded with pearls. The king of Magadha, deft in swordplay and hereditary enemy of his clan, gave him an audience hall. The king of Avanti, as token of his submission, presented him with a sumptuous archway. These gifts, heavy with gold gems, made with a skill unknown to the best of craftsmen, were the work of Maya, the architect of the genie, who had once given them, for some service rendered, to the ancestors of these kings. When their gifts were all gathered together, they formed a harmonious ensemble, admired by all men of taste.

The town of Puhār possessed a spacious forum for storing bales of merchandise, with markings showing the quantity, weight, and name of owner. Since there were no doors or guards, robbers might have been tempted. But there was an invisible watchman, a genie, who blinded any would-be thief so that he was left staggering about with his burden on his head, unable to find his way out. Hence, at the mere thought of stealing, everyone was struck by fear.

There was a miraculous pond, where the lame, the mute, the deaf, or the leprous, by bathing in its waters or walking round it, could recover beauty, strength, and health. In an open square stood a tall polished monolith. Men driven mad by an excess of drugs, paralyzed by poison, bitten by sharp-toothed snakes, or possessed by ghosts, found instant relief by walking round it and worshipping it. There was a crossing of four roads where lived a fierce genie. His voice could be heard ten leagues away when he shouted that he would blind, beat, and devour imposters dressed as monks to dissimulate their misdeeds, crafty women addicted to secret vice, dishonest ministers, lewd seducers of others' wives, and all bearers of false witness and gossip. There was also a square where stood a rare

statue, the lips of which never parted, but which shed tears when the monarch transgressed the law or failed to render justice. In these five notable places daily sacrifices were offered by wise people who understood their mystery. (Danielou 1965, 20–2)

The lovers crossed the main street, with its warehouses of merchandise from overseas. Then they came to the low-lying quarters near the sea, where flags, raised high toward the sky, seemed to be saying: 'On these stretches of white sand can be found the goods that foreign merchants, leaving their own countries to stay among us, have brought here in great ships.' One could see the booths of dealers in colours, shoes, flowers, perfumes and sweets of all kinds. Farther on, the lamps of the skillful goldsmiths were shining, and those of the porridge-sellers, seated in rows. Peddlers of trinkets had heavy black lamps raised on stands. Farther on were the lamps of the fishmongers. Near the shore lighthouses had been built to show ships the way to the harbour. Far away one could see the tiny lights of the fishing boats laying their nets in the deep sea. All night lamps were burning, the lamps of foreigners who talk strange tongues, and the lamps of the guards who watch over precious cargoes near the docks. Bordered by rows of aloes, the sea-shore was more enchanting even than the fields with their lotus ponds and streams. The lamps gave such abundant light that one could have found a single mustard seed had it fallen on the clear sand spread evenly like fine flour. (Danielou 1965, 30)

And here is Maturai:

Accompanied by the saint, famous for her virtues, Kovalan and Kannaki completed the last night of their journey. Toward morning they heard, like distant thunder, the sound of drums being beaten in Shiva's great temple and in the sanctuaries of all the other gods, as well as in the great palace of the famous king whose renown has travelled to the end of the world. They could hear the Vedas being chanted by the learned brahmans and the prayers being recited by the monks, filling the morning air with their holy murmur. They could hear the roll of victory drums (*mulavu*), which are beaten daily in honour of the warriors, armed with swords, who never come back from the battlefield except as victors. They could also hear trumpeting elephants, captured on the field of battle, and the cries of wild tuskers caught in the deep forests, the neighing of horses in their stalls, the noise of *kinai*, the small drums used to accompany dancers practising at dawn, and many vague sounds arising from the city (Madurai), which recalled the murmur of a perfidious ocean. To the tired travellers these sounds seemed friendly calls of welcome, and made them forget the hardships experienced on the way. (Danielou 1965, 90)

Kovalan entered the city through a winding passage near the huge gate where the elephants pass, waving their trunks. The passage crossed the broad moat filled with shining water, bordered by thick brushwork, forming a secure protection. Unnoticed by the Greek mercenaries armed with swords, who kept watch at the gate, he passed the bastion, covered with junglelike overgrowth, over which the banners waved in the western wind. Suddenly he could see the splendour of the city, as if the treasure of the thousand-eyed Indra had miraculously been spread out before him. (Danielou 1965, 94)

Kovalan wandered along the main street, bordered by luxurious villas, which ruling kings secretly visit and which are the homes of courtesans exempt from music, the seven scales, the songs, the rhythms, the art of oboe playing, and that of accompaniment on leather drums. A singing mistress (*toriamadandai*) sang a melody (*varani*), while other women spun thread or wove beautiful wreaths. In the shops Kovalan noticed steel saws, tools for carving ivory, incense, pastes and flower bouquets so rich and colourful that kings might have envied them. (Danielou 1965, 97)

Madavi, with her protegee, passed the city gate where every day a new pennant was raised to announce a victory. The ramparts were topped with a junglelike overgrowth as additional protection. There was also a moat, above which they could see arbalests for shooting arrows great distances. There was a catching device with its black pincers, catapults for throwing stones, huge cauldrons to hold boiling water or molten lead, hooks, chains and traps resembling *andalai* birds (with a man's head and a beak that breaks skulls). There were also other weapons of many kinds: iron arms, sharp spears, heaps of arrows and nails, rams, sharp needles to pierce eyes, machines resembling kingfishers used to put out eyes, wooden balls covered with sharp nails, machines to strike blows, heavy weights, huge beams, maces and projectiles. Finally Madavi led Kannaki into her cottage. (Danielou 1965, 104–5)

Passing through the street of the courtesans, he reached the bazaar. There he saw a goldsmith in court dress, who was walking along, tweezers in hand, followed by a hundred jewellers all famous for their craftsmanship. Kovalan thought this must be the goldsmith of the Pandya monarch. So he approached him and inquired:

'Could you estimate the value of an anklet worthy of the consort of the great king who protects us?'

The goldsmith had the face of Death's dread messenger. He answered with obsequious politeness:

'I am a novice in this great art: I know only how to make diadems and a few royal ornaments.' Kovalan opened the packet containing the precious anklet. The perfidious goldsmith examined the fine workmanship of the chiselling in pure gold and the rare rubies and diamonds. After a pause he said: 'This circlet can be purchased only by the great queen herself. I am going to the palace, and shall speak to the victorious king. You may wait with the anklet near my humble home till I return.' Kovalan sat down in a small shrine that stood near the villain's cottage. When he saw him waiting in the narrow temple, the hardhearted thief thought: Before anyone discovers that it was I who stole the (queen's) anklet. I shall accuse this foreigner before the king. He then walked on. (Danielou 1965, 108–9)

Pukār clearly has a heterogenetic character. I shall mention here only a few details. The order is a technical order, an environment for both good and evil; the whole and the maimed, the lame, the deaf and the blind have their place. It is a market city, an open city, both physically and socially. Pukār means 'the mouth of a river'. As a seaport, foreigners are at home; they have accumulated wealth and built houses. Ordinary citizens like Kovalan̲ and his wife Kaṇṇaki live in it and are mentioned by name. A great variety of religions and gods is also mentioned, paralleling the variety of the social scene. The city itself is a found functional order by occupation, contrasting with the city founded and planned according to an imposed geometric order. Instead of ritual, festival and bards, we have drama, game, song. Instead of a sacred literati, we have the impression of a cosmopolitan intelligentsia, accustomed and hospitable to foreigners, enjoying and accepting variety in trade as in women, pleasure and lifestyle. There are no high buildings or palaces conspicuously mentioned, though several impressive public places are. The city scene in Ayodhyā is static and processional, though full and varied; Pukār (as Maturai) swarms with real life, and it changes from street to street, from house to beach; the lovers cross the street.

Maturai with its elaborately described fortifications, battlements and weapons of destruction is a protected and moated city like Ayodhyā ('the city none can challenge in warfare') and unlike the open Pukār. Instead of the pluralism of the many gods of Pukār, we hear the drums of Śiva; the dominance of one deity is paralleled by the significant absence of the Greeks in Maturai except as mercenaries. The foreigner (here Kovalan̲ from a neighbouring kingdom, not even a Greek) is unwelcome, suspected, victimised. All the protection of battlements is after all against the attack of outsiders. It is a unitary city. Like Ayodhyā, the emphasis here too is as strongly on moral order as it is on military defence: the Paṇḍya king prides himself on the rigour of his justice, and dies on the spot when he hears that Kovalan̲ was killed unjustly, and with him Maturai goes up in flames. Yet unlike Ayodhyā, Maturai is a corrupt city—the corruption is suggested by the differing attitudes to courtesans and concubines exhibited in Pukār and Maturai.

The unitary nature of Maturai and its attendant inhospitality to strangers is suggested by the multiple functions of the drum sounds heard by Kovalan̲ and Kaṇṇaki as they approach the city: the drums of Śiva like distant thunder beaten in temples as well as in the king's palace, the roll of victory drums beaten daily in honour of warriors, and the noise of *kiṇai*, the small drums used to accompany dancers practising at dawn. The many sounds of Maturai recall 'the murmur of a perfidious ocean', though to the tired Kovlan̲ and Kaṇṇaki they seemed 'friendly calls of welcome.'

Kovalan̲, cosmopolitan merchant citizen of Pukār (the open city hospitable to foreigners even from overseas), comes to Maturai (city enclosed by moat and battlement, with no assimilation of foreigners), and he is killed there. The contrast between the two types of city, their ambience and atmosphere, is part of the literary structure of the *Cilappatikāram*.

R.S. Lopez, in 'The Crossroads Within the Wall', speaks of two defining features of a city:

> In the earliest handwriting that we can read, hieroglyphic, the ideogram meaning city consists of a cross enclosed in a circle. The cross represents the convergence of roads which bring in and redistribute men, merchandise and ideas. . . . The circle, in hieroglyph, indicates a moat or a wall. This need not be materially erected so long as it is morally present, to keep the citizens together, sheltered from the cold, wide world, conscious of belonging to a unique team. . . . The wall may become an obstacle if it is too high and tight, if it hinders further growth, above all if it frustrates the opportunity for exchanges beyond it. (Lopez 1963, 17–18)

In the Tamil epic, Pukār is pre-eminently the Crossroads City and Maturai, the Walled City. Like the picture of Ayodhyā and all its details, the pictures of Pukār and Maturai show a perfect intuitive grasp of a typology of cities and their characteristic lifestyles. The apparent conventionality of description should not deceive us; we have to look behind them for the imaginative rationale of their presence. The poet's grasp of structural relations and their entailments in the details of experience is worth the social scientists' attention. The poet's detail not only offers realisations and intuitions of structure, but a whole repertory of hypotheses that might be the beginnings of fresh scientific observations.

III. SPECULATIONS ON CITY AND COUNTRY IN SANSKRIT AND TAMIL

This section is frankly speculative. Rather large though tentative generalisations are offered for future discussion and more exact inquiry by scholars better equipped than I.

As suggested earlier, the city/country polarity seems to appear in classical Sanskrit, though Vedic literature and early Tamil literature do not seem to have it. For classical Sanskrit (as represented by Kālidāsa or the poets of Ingalls' *Anthology*), the city is civilisation, as it was to the

Romans. Even by the time of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the literature makes a distinction between *pura*, 'city', and *janapada*, 'folksite'. In the literature itself, *mārga*, 'the royal road', is distinguished from *dēśi*, 'the by-ways, the folk-writings'. When Rāma leaves Ayodhyā, he is soon in the wilderness. The many exiles of Sanskrit literature (the *araṇyakāṇḍa*, or the Forest Canto, of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; the *vanaparva*, the Forest Section, of the *Mahābhārata*) as well as the classical fourth state of a householder's life-cycle, *vānaprāsthāśrama* ('the phase of a forest-dweller'), all speak of a city/forest contrast.

Such a contrast between city and country or forest appears to be one realisation of a more pervasive thematic contrast which might be described as the nature/culture opposition. A city man was a *nāgarika*, the civilised man; one word for vulgarity was *grāmya*, 'of the countryside'. The same opposition is seen in language: Sanskrit/Prākrit, Sanskrit being 'the refined, cultured, perfected', Prākrit 'the natural (or the derived)'. Especially by classical times, most speakers must have been bidialectal; even Kālidāsa (circa 5th century?) presumably spoke one language at home (a regional Prākrit) and another in city and court. In plays, the diglossia is functional; women and servants speak Prākrit, while all noble and learned characters speak Sanskrit. The nature/culture opposition appears in the central theme of Sanskrit aesthetic theory as well; aesthetic emotion, *rasa*, is clearly distinguished from *bhāva*, or natural 'inborn' everyday feeling. *Rasa* is emotion refined, generalised, rid of incompatibles and impurities; *bhāva* is the natural feeling of everyday occasion. The word *rasa*, 'flavour or essence', hints also at a cooked/raw opposition.

Such a clear-cut nature/culture dichotomy led to certain kinds of literary biases. Nature or *bhāva* was never accepted in itself; it had to be refined or improved upon, given contexts and attributes beyond nature. An instance will make this clear: in the index entries of Ingalls' *Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry* (1965, 610), the following attributes of snakes are mentioned:

afraid of emeralds
dwell in anthills
eat wind
jewels in (snake's) blood
proverbial prey of peacocks
snakes of Śiva
world-snake

Here is a typical poem with a snake in it:

When the snake that forms his girdle starts away
from the emerald of the bowing Indra's crown
in terror of that ornament;
may he, at whom the mountain daughter
smiles with sidelong glance
to see him on his deerskin mat
thus forced to cover up his dipping loincloth,
may Śiva, bring you purity.

(Ingalls 1965, 81)

Rarely do we find a literal description, though it was known and recognised as a poetic figure of *svabhāvokti* (natural speech). A detailed nature description for its own sake was frowned upon as inferior art, *citrakavitā* or 'painterly' poetry.

Like the city in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, classical Sanskrit was to be perfect, finished, untainted, non-regional, ruled by grammarian Pāṇini's unexceptionable rules. Whatever be the actual reality of the language, such an 'artifice of eternity . . . taking its form out of no natural thing' (Yeats' phrase) was the ideal.

The contrast is heightened when we look at a 'natural language' like Tamil. The conventions of *caṅkam* Tamil poetry (which I have detailed elsewhere; see Ramanujan 1967) are based on the five landscapes of the Tamil country—hill, forest, seashore, agricultural tract, and desert wilderness. The city is not opposed to country or forest, but is part of one of the five landscapes, the fertile agricultural tract. All five landscapes have their own cultures, their inhabitants, gods, occupations, musical styles, as they have their flora and fauna. What little we know of regional geography and social history seems to support our speculations. As Burton Stein points out in a recent paper:

Though there was clearly an opposition between peasant and non-peasant in later times . . . in the early centuries of the Christian era, during which the classification (into five landscapes) may be considered as descriptive of the important settings in which even men of the southeastern peninsula lived, the peasant folk, *uḻavar*, of the *marudam* (the west agricultural lowlands) were only one among several territorially segmented social and cultural sub-systems, each different in essential ways, yet all comprising a single general cultural area with shared linguistic and other cultural elements.[6] (Stein 1967, 247)

The continuity of city and country, nature and culture, is apparent elsewhere too in Tamil. In contrast to Sanskrit, early Tamil aesthetics makes no clear distinction between *bhāva* and *rasa*, the raw everyday feelings

and the refined emotions of art and poetry. If etymologies mean anything, the native word for culture, 'panpu', sometimes means nature, while in other contexts it connotes culture. *Pan* means 'to produce'; it also means 'a harmony, a musical mode'—a complex of meanings, inclusive of both nature and culture: very different from Sanskrit *saṁskṛta* which implies 'a refinement, a redoing' of things natural.

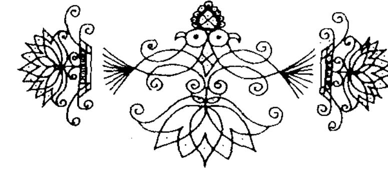
Such a lack of the nature/culture contrast (in its city/country manifestation or the aesthetic/natural-feeling opposition in Tamil poetics) leads to different poetic effects. However conventional the poetry, nature is closely observed, not mythologised, fabulised or stylised as in Sanskrit, or only very rarely, compared to the Sanskrit modes. A snake's sloughed-off skin, its movements, the yellow stripe or brown pattern, are all carefully observed and set down. The total amount of realistic detail is overwhelming: a recent botanist (B.L. Swami) has written in Tamil a book on the accurate scientific description of the flora in *caṅkam* poetry. Here is an example of a Tamil poem with a snake in it, to be compared with the Sanskrit one above:

As a little white snake
with lovely stripes on its young body
troubles the jungle elephant
the slip of a girl
her teeth like sprouts of new rice
her wrists stacked with bangles
troubles me.

Kuṟuntokai 119, Catti Naṭaṉar (Ramanujan 1967, 54)

Furthermore, nature becomes the repertory of images for all the human events of a civilisation. Natural objects become the vocabulary of culture. Like Ayodhyā, classical Sanskrit literature itself presents an impressive imposed order which is strict, neat, elaborate, cultivated and exclusive, redoing nature by its conventions. Like a 'rurban' centre continuous with the countryside, with cultural expression in every one of the five landscapes, Tamil presents an order growing out of nature. Classical Tamil convention does not redo nature, but places and orders it.

Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food-images



I

One of the aims of this paper is to capture the 'common sense' regarding food, of someone like myself who grew up in a South Indian brahman bilingual household in Mysore—the 'commonplaces' acquired through proverbs, tales, attendance at life-cycle ceremonies (weddings, births, 'nuptials', death ceremonies, etc.), or being subjected to elderly women's or Ayurvedic pundits' remedies, and so on. Though I cite sources and scholarship here, I have used them chiefly to remind myself and to sift through what I knew as a boy without quite knowing what I knew. The ethnographic writings of Khare (1976) especially, and those of Beck (1972), Ferro-Luzzi (1975), and Marriott (1968) have been most useful, and I am indebted to them. This is an open ended-anthology to be enlarged by fellow-natives and para-natives. Most of my folklore examples are from kannada, unless otherwise indicated.

This essay/anthology/collage/primer falls into two parts: both cite poems and passages from Indian literatures to exemplify certain principles regarding food. Each passage will display a different paradigm in which 'food' participates. Each paradigm presents food in a different aspect, gives it a new 'interpretant', a new 'translation'. The first section will draw from these well-known passages a system of signification (in Eco's sense of the term; see Eco 1976).

Communicative acts presuppose signification systems, as *parole* presupposes *langue*, as pragmatics presupposes a syntactics—or even better, I would say, as poetry presupposes language. Cultural systems in use are more like poetry, or at least more like the poetic use of language than

like ordinary language. So terms of rhetoric and poetics are more useful in describing a system like food or clothing than terms developed for a linguistics that can describe sentences but nothing larger (like discourse), that cannot adequately and elegantly describe a metaphor.

The second part of this paper cites passages that illustrate the actual uses of food and its meanings that breed further meanings by metaphor, metonymy, etc., making figures out of the basic language. I believe with Peirce that 'symbols grow' and semiosis is 'unlimited' (see Peirce 1931–35).

My concern here is synchronic; I wish someone would explore the social history of these images and ideas.

II

The basic 'language', or the set of structures underlying Hindu commonplaces about food, seems to consist of a cycle, a triangle, and four sets of distinctive features, all of them well known to specialists as well as to natives, though the latter may not state them explicitly.

FOOD CYCLES

In childhood we heard early about the world being food (*annamayam jagat*). When we heard a Sanskrit passage like the following in a *Harikathā* recital, it rang more than a bell:

FOOD CHAIN

From food, from food
creatures, all creatures
come to be.

Gorging, disgorging,
beings come
to be.

By food they live,
in food they move,
into food they pass:

food, the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be,

elixir,
herb of herbs
for mortals.

Food, food, brahman is food:

only they eat
who know
they eat their god.

For food is the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be:

elixir,
herb of herbs
for mortals.

From food all beings
come to be,
by food

they grow,
into food
they pass.

And what eats is eaten:
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.

After the Sanskrit, *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, *vallī* 2, *anuvāka* 2;
translated by A.K. Ramanujan

Food is brahman, because food is what circulates in the universe, through bodies which in turn are food made flesh and bone. According to this view, in the organic world, there is no other stuff: food is the primal substance, all animate beings are its forms. One may stretch it further and see this cycle as including inorganic matter as well. All forms arise out of food and return to it—which is, after all, one of the descriptions of brahman, the ground of being. In the transformations of food, inorganic becomes organic, one form is metamorphosed into another; the eater is eaten, big fish eat little fish, and if you wait long enough, little fish eat big fish.

This cycle is part of a larger cycle that includes the gods, as in the next two examples.

THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ, 3.11–16

(11) With this shall ye sustain the gods so that the gods may sustain you [in return]. Sustaining one another [thus] ye shall achieve the highest good.

(12) For, [so] sustained by sacrifice the gods will give you the food of your desire. Whoso enjoys their gifts yet gives them nothing [in return] is a thief, no more nor less.

(13) Good men who eat the leavings of the sacrifice are freed from every taint, but evil are they and evil do they eat who cook [only] for their own sakes.

(14) From food do [all] contingent beings derive and food derives from rain; rain derives from sacrifice and sacrifice from works.

(15) From brahman work arises, know this, and brahman is born from the Imperishable; therefore is brahman, penetrating everywhere, forever based on sacrifice.

(16) So was the wheel in motion set: and whoso here fails to match his turning [with the turning of the wheel], living an evil life, the senses his pleasure-ground, lives out his life in vain. (Zaehner 1969)

WHEN DEATH IS ON HOLIDAY

The son of the Sun God,
Time, King of all things right and true,
the God of Death,
is on holiday.

No death in the human world.
The world is full
of old people.
They cannot die
for Death is away
and cannot be reached.

Grandfather's father
is still here
and so is his grandfather's
grandfather.

The five-hundred-year-old
are mere babies here,
for they have their grandfathers
alive with them.

No gruel, not by any chance,
in any house,
for eight or ten vats
are not enough
for a round.

Just millions of people
milling in a house,
people without teeth,
moving like painted dolls.

Some cannot see.
Some cannot hear.
Some bald heads
shine like silver plates.

Starve them for ten days,
they do not die.

But there is no decrease
of births. Babies are born,
here, there, now, then,
everywhere.

I should stop.
I cannot describe it.

Kunjan Nambiyar, Malayalam, 18th century; translated by
K.M. George and A.K. Ramanujan

ENTROPY AND ITS PRODUCTS

Now the larger cycle is replicated in, or replicates, the social realm. In Marriott's apt image, 'The circulation of food is the lifeblood of caste rank.' But this circulation depends on a three-way distinction, the Indian food triangle: Food/Leftovers/Faeces, a sort of entropy (Khare 1976). For entropy, a 'linear' progression or decay within each unit of the cycle is part of cyclical systems: the days of a week, or the seasons in a year, or *yugas* in cosmic time are linear, but weeks, seasons, *yugas*, etc., are cyclical. Our first poem expresses this twofold order very effectively: it moves towards a climax till the middle of the poem, and then repeats itself, miming a cycle, and then ends with a second climax. Now for the triangle again.

Food (*anna*) is what you offer the gods; the other two cannot be offered—in the epics, when demons wish to disrupt a sacrifice, they pour garbage and faeces into the sacrificial fire. The former is *medhya*, the latter are *amedhya* ('unfit for sacrifice', a common brahman euphemism for shit). Leftovers (*eñjalu*, in Kannada) and faeces have to do with the two ends of the alimentary canal; both pollute. *Eñjalu* also means 'saliva'; leftovers could also mean 'uneaten food'. As Marriott and others have shown, the giving and taking of these three things places people on the rungs of a hierarchy. I shall say no more about these transactions, as they are well-explored (Marriott 1968).

In common parlance, dogs and pigs are low animals, and freely used in proverbs and abuse terms (as in *eñjalu tinnō nāyi*, 'he is a dog that eats leftovers'), because they eat leftovers and faeces. The natural cycle of

food and faeces concerns Ayurvedic physicians, who classify the latter as ripe and unripe. Their first questions to a patient are concerned with *kālapravṛtti*, or the movements of time, which is (at least, was) their technical term for bowel movements. And to all the negative connotations of the left hand is added its association with faeces: one eats with the right, and washes oneself with the left. In Tamil, the left hand is regularly called *piiccaṅkay*, 'the faecal hand'; you neither serve nor take food with it. The right hand is called *sōttukkay*, 'the food hand'.

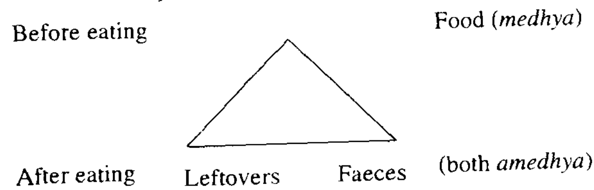


Fig. 1: The Hindu Food Triangle

See Khare for further subtleties of the many cycles and the triangle (Khare 1976, 109, 136).

These relations and transactions and cycles may be replicated even spatially, as Selwyn (1980) shows in the following diagram of the different stages of a village feast.

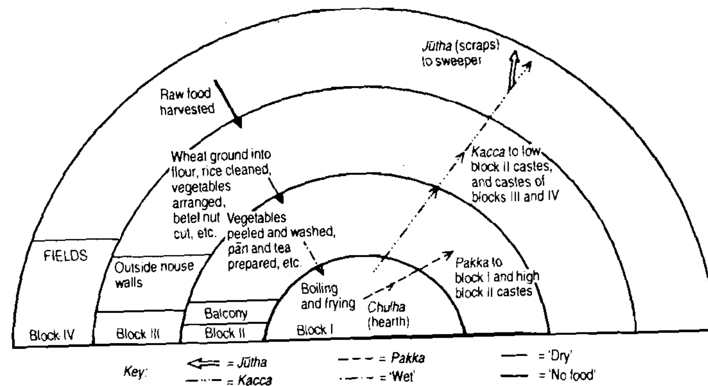


Fig. 2: The Commensal Structure of a Feast. The figure represents the career of food as it is prepared, cooked, served and eaten at an intercaste feast (*bhoj*). It shows how food is progressively transformed by members of castes from progressive higher blocks before being finally served by Brahman cooks (Selwyn, p. 313)

The diagram points to another expressive pattern: social distance is expressed through distance from the kitchen. The nearest relatives and friends are admitted to the kitchen and fed close to the cooking stove, others further and further away, depending on how distant they are socially, ritually or by caste. The kitchen is so central that the gods too are either part of the kitchen, or given a niche or room very close to it.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

Now, all foods can be characterised by four sets of distinctive features: (a) the three *guṇas* or 'strands' or 'constituents' of all things: *satva, rajassu, tamassu* (Kannada terms adapted from Sanskrit); (b) 'heating' and 'cooling', *uṣṇa* and *śīta* in Kannada; (c) the three *doṣas* or 'humours': bile, wind, and phlegm—*pittha, vāyu*, and *kapha*; and (d) the six *rasas* or tastes: sweet, sour, pungent (or savoury), astringent, bitter, and salty—*sihi, huḷi, khāra, ogaru, kahi*, and *uppu* (all Dravidian words, except *khāra*, though all six have corresponding Sanskrit terms).

Of these, the last set is sensory, the second and third sets are physiological (and causes of certain effects), and the first is characteriological (and causal and explanatory of certain properties). All of them, like the elements of Indian aesthetics, are consumer-oriented: they are causes known by their effects.

Such words and concepts were well known to us through the oral tradition at home, not through texts. ('You may not know Sanskrit, you certainly know the taste of pepper,' says a proverb.) Anytime we caught a cold, or had a pimple, or felt dizzy, or discussed why certain communities that drink buffaloes' milk are dull-witted, we heard of *śīta, uṣṇa, pittha*, or *tāmasika* foods causing these states. Or in proverbs and abuse: 'Your bile (*pittha*) has mounted to your head,' meaning 'You're crazy.'

The *guṇas* relate food to temperament; you are what you eat, and your taste expresses your character. The *Bhagavadgītā* has a classic and influential passage on the subject:

THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ, 17.7–10

(7) Threefold again is food—[food] that agrees with each [different type of] man: [so too] sacrifice, ascetic practice, and the gift of alms. Listen to the difference between them.

(8) Foods that promote a fuller life, vitality, strength, health, pleasure, and good-feeling, [foods that are] savoury, rich in oil and firm, heart-gladdening—[these] are agreeable to the man of goodness.

(9) Foods that are pungent, sour, salty, stinging hot, sharp, rough, and burning—[these] are what the man of Passion loves. They bring pain, misery, and sickness.

(10) What is stale and tasteless, rotten and decayed—leavings, what is unfit for sacrifice, is food agreeable to the man of Darkness. (Zaehner 1969)

It is clear that tastes (*rasas*) are related to the *guṇas*. The six tastes are also related to the six seasons, which affect the balance of humours in the body, among other things. All these are held together by a medical view of food: food and medicine are classified together in these four ways. As we saw in the very first passage, food is described as elixir, herb of herbs. The medical texts (as well as mothers and hypochondriacs) take the characterisations of food seriously and literally. All foods have medical properties, not only the proverbial 'apple a day'. Foods are part of the Ayurvedic regimen (*pathya*), even its pharmacopia.

I must add that these four sets of characteristics do not seem to be correlated with each other in any precise fashion, though some correlations are clearly made, as in the passage from the *Gītā* quoted above. There is much disagreement from community to community regarding which items cause 'heating' and which 'cooling'. In south India, but not in the north, papayas are considered extremely 'heating'; they induce abortions, and so should not be eaten by pregnant women. For details on Tamilnadu, see Beck (1969) and Ferro-Luzzi (1975); for Karnataka, see Regelson (1972).

Fig. 3 is a simplified diagram about one common set of correlations, based ultimately on Caraka. (I am indebted to Visvajit Pandya [1980] for it. Marriott [1968] has a subtler, more complex diagram, but this was closer to what we knew roughly in childhood, or how my mother's cuisine and advice operated.)

Meal sequences are orchestrated around these *rasas*; textures, temperatures, smells, and colours also play a part. I do not see a deliberate distribution of 'heating' and 'cooling' foods in the daily cycle—though they play a big part in the regimen of the sick, lactating mothers, etc., and in food-offerings to certain gods (no chillies for Viṣṇu). To the six classical *rasas*, we should add a seventh, 'bland, insipid' (*cappunu* in Tamil, *sappe* in Kannada), as Regelson rightly suggests. Fig. 4 shows a (good) South Indian vegetarian meal sequence from a Tamil-speaking brahman family.

Course 2 repeats 1, intensified; in a festive meal, 3 is a climax, sweet being the highest of the tastes. Course 4, like the last part of a Sanskrit play, pacifies (*śānta rasa*) the palate with white, bland, and sour, with pickle to offset the rest. Even restaurants follow this order when they serve course by course. The meal could be topped with betelnut and

SEASONS, HUMOURS, AND *RASAS*



[after Caraka; based on Pandya 1980, p.38]

Fig. 3: Seasons, Humours, and *Rasas*

betel-leaf, which supply astringent and spicy tastes that are supposed to help digestion.

A poorer meal would still keep the order, though it may omit, say, course 2 or 1; if it is a single course, 4 is preferred. Course 3, as suggested, is part of a festive, not a daily, menu. We must also note that, within each course, the order of service is as shown, but the eater would mix the elements in each course (except 3) together, and eat them 'simultaneously', not in sequence.

Such a meal illustrates a straightforward use of the *rasa* system. If the *rasas* or tastes are like motifs, the meal is like a discourse with a climax and a resolution.

III

Now these features of the food system, the cycle, the triangle, and the distinctive features can be used in a straightforward way or figuratively, obliquely, yielding new meanings by association, reversal, allusion, etc. Various kinds of markings by food, in social and other kinds of contexts, are usually by association or metonymy. Class and caste, male and

	Taste	Items	Temperature	State	Colour, texture
Course 1	savoury	vegetable	hot	solid	green, etc.
	bland	rice + ghee	hot	solid	white, soft
	sour	*rasam**	hot	liquid	yellow-brown, thin
Course 2	bland	rice + ghee	hot	solid	white, soft
	extra-savoury	*sāmbār*	hot	liquid	deeper yellow, etc.
	savoury	vegetable	hot	solid	green, etc.
Course 3 (festive, optional)	savoury	*vaḍai*	hot	solid	deep-fried, dark brown
	sweet	*pāyasam*	hot	semi-liquid	milky brown
Course 4	bland	rice	hot	solid	white
	sour	yoghurt	cold	semi-liquid or liquid	white
	sour, spiced	pickle	cold, pre-prepared	solid	red

**rasam*, a liquid 'pepper broth'; *sāmbār*, thick lentil sauce; *vaḍai*, fried cutlet-like snack; *pāyasam*, rice boiled in sweetened milk.

Fig. 4: Meal Sequence

female, child and adult, ordinary and special occasions, auspicious and inauspicious events, sickness and wellness are all marked by the foods that are associated with them. Certain foods are required, or preferred, others are taboo, in each context by rules of usage. The gods partake of these markings too: for example, they are vegetarian/non-vegetarian, ordinary/special, Śaiva/Vaiṣṇava. One or another of the four distinctive features may be used to justify this association: chaste-minded widows should not eat certain *rājasika* or hot or sweet foods because they are aphrodisiac. Proverbs express and play with these markings, which may also use the order of foods served (in death ceremonies, rice is served first; in weddings, never first), or what it is served in (insiders are served in metal plates, outsiders on leaves), etc. We may classify these contexts and their markers as in Fig. 5.

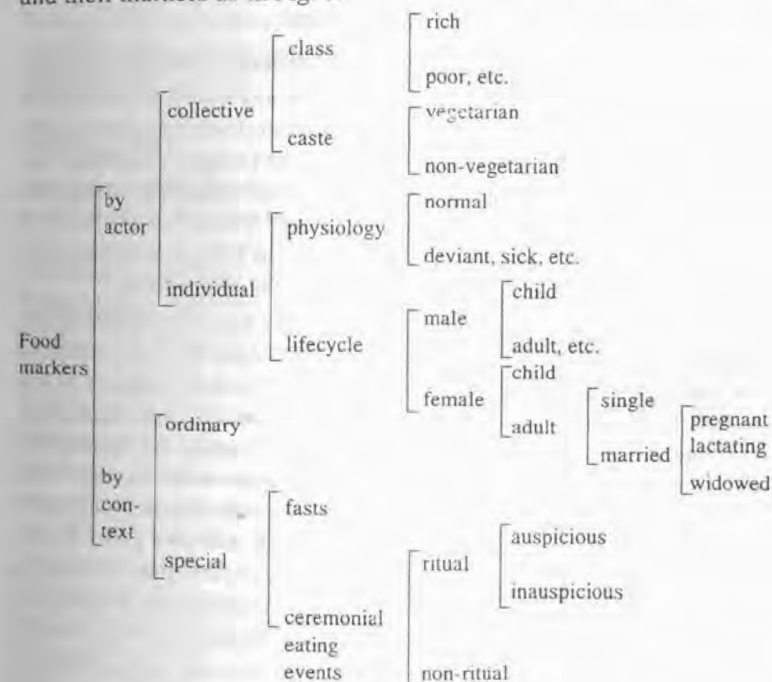


Fig. 5: Food Contexts (as seen in proverbs, etc.)

Kannada proverbs allude to all these markers. Here are some examples, with their obvious social meanings.

The man drinks gruel, but he needs a man to hold up his moustache. ('Gruel' marks poverty.)

It's better to eat *obbaṭṭu* at a wedding than *vaḍe* on a death anniversary. (*Obbaṭṭu*, a sweet crêpe, served in weddings, is auspicious; *vaḍe* marks inauspicious death ceremonies.)

Work and eat if you're pregnant; sit and eat if you're a *bāṇanti*. (A *bāṇanti* is woman who has just had a baby. Pregnancy vs. lactation.)

The one who eats once a day is a *yogi*; the one who eats twice is a *bhōgi* ('enjoyer'); the one who eats thrice is a *rōgi* ('sick man'); and the one who eats four times a day—take him away to the burial ground. (Food regimen for health and sickness.)

No feast without a *hōḷige*, no temple-celebration without a chariot. (*Hōḷige*, a sweet crêpe, marks festivity.)

FIGURES OF FOOD?

The three central terms of Indian semiotics/poetics, *abhidhā, lakṣaṇā*, and *vyañjanā* (*vakrokti, dhvani*, etc.), roughly translated as denotation, connotation, and suggestion may be useful in our discussion here. In the well-known Sanskrit example, 'the village on the Ganges', the phrase denotes a village located *on* the Ganges; as that is not literally possible, one accepts the connotative meaning that the village is really *on the banks* of the Ganges; and because it is on the river-bank, the village must have cool breezes blowing over it, etc., which becomes the suggestion.

In matters of food, the three orders of meaning would be the utilitarian, the symbolic, and the expressive. Food is utilitarian in that it is something to be eaten, leftovers cannot be served to a superior or a god, or in that food has the four properties of taste, produces heating/cooling effects, etc. (Note that these properties are considered factual by the native.) Food is symbolic because, by being associated with certain social contexts, it acquires non-literal values—butter is Kṛṣṇa-ite, *puḷiyōgare* ('tamarind rice') is typically a Śrī Vaiṣṇava dish, *ambali* ('gruel') is the food of poverty. Food is expressive when the above two kinds of meaning are deployed to yield ironies, reversals, poetic metaphors (in language as well as in the medium of food itself), as when Śabari, the wild-woman devotee in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, served fruits to Rāma after she had tasted them, reversing the hierarchy, giving god her leftovers instead of receiving them from him.

For instance, in Śrī Vaiṣṇava Tamil, the customary difference between home foods and temple foods is collapsed: home food is referred to in terms that are appropriate to the temple. Drinking water is *tīrtham*, which is the holy water one receives in the temple; the daily cooked rice is *(pra)sādam*, the Lord's food distributed after the service in the temple; other items receive the suffix *amudu* (*amṛta*, divine nectar), so that an ordinary vegetable dish is called *kari(ya)mudu*, etc. This conflation sets this community apart from other groups, and also expresses a conviction that their home is no different from a temple. Thus food is used as a metaphor to say that home and temple are alike, even one.

As figures of speech get their effects by both exploiting and violating common language codes, 'figures of food' use the system to communicate irony, defiance, appreciation, intimacy, etc., by collapsing commonly-held distinctions or reversing them. Take the food/leftover/faeces distinctions. In straight usage, these are clearly hierarchic: servants, animals, beggars may eat leftovers; traditionally, an orthodox wife ate in the unwashed plate of the husband to show her love and submission to him. In *bhakti* Hindu practice, all food is first offered to the household god, and his leftovers received back as his *prasāda*. In stories like the following, told all over the country, even a god's faeces confer favour on the devout.

FILTHY LUCRE

Two sisters-in-law lived in a village. The younger sister-in-law was very poor and worked for the older one, who was rich.

The day of Śakaṭ came. The younger sister-in-law said to the elder, 'Give me something from which I can make my offerings to Śakaṭ: things like *laḍḍu, peḍā*, sesame *burka*.' The older woman grudgingly gave her a handful of broken rice. The poor one took it home, pounded it, and did her best to make the proper kind of food for the god. Then she did *pūjā*. That night the god came and said, 'I'm hungry, mother, give me something.' 'I've nothing much to give. Only some *laḍḍu* made out of a handful of broken rice.' So he ate it. Soon he said, 'Now I've indigestion. I've to shit.' 'Go to the toilet,' she said. 'Where should I go? I can't wait,' he said. She said, 'If you don't want to go outside, go into a corner of my hut.' So he did, in the four corners. Then he said, 'I must wash. Where can I wash myself?' She said, 'We don't have any water. Clean yourself with my hair.' So he wiped himself on her head.

When she woke up at dawn, she found she had gold ornaments on her hair, and gold in the four corners of her hut. She didn't go to work that day. Her older sister-in-law came up and said, 'You didn't come for work today.' The younger one said, 'Why should I? You do my work for me today. God Śakaṭ has given me everything.' The older one looked around and said, 'He gave you everything? How did he give you all this?' The younger one told her how the god came at night and ate up all the *laḍḍus* she had made with the handful of broken rice the older woman had given her. 'Then he gave me everything,' she said.

A whole year passed. Then the older one did the very same things the younger one had done with broken rice. That night, Śakaṭdevatā came. He said he was

hungry. She said, 'Eat what I've kept there. Just as you did at my sister-in-law's.' Then he wanted to shit. She said, 'Go inside the house, don't go out.' 'Where shall I wash?' he asked next. 'Here, here, on my head,' she said.

And in the morning, she found shit everywhere, bad smell and shit in all four directions, and on her head as well. (Hindi folktale, after Susan Wadley's translation)

In common belief, god's *prasāda* never becomes faeces, it feeds only the spirit. For ritual purification, one takes *pañcagavya* or the five products of the sacred cow, mixing ghee and curds (the best foods) with cow's urine and cowdung. On New Year's Day, one is served bitter *neem*-sprouts mixed with jaggery, a mixture of sweet and bitter, to symbolise the bittersweet nature of the year's blessings. In all such cases, opposites meet in a kind of oxymoron.

In the god/man relation, the food triangle is reversed, expressing a paradox. And so it is in the case of *sannyāsīs* (renouncers, the most respected stage): they must eat leftovers (at least symbolic ones). And certain *yogis* are said to recycle it all, and eat their own excrement. None of these instances would have their expressive charge if the original triangle and hierarchy of food/leftovers/faeces were not commonly accepted. The taboo on saliva and leftovers is also lifted for children:

CHILDREN

Even when a man has earned much
of whatever can be earned,
shared it with many,
even when he is master of great estates,
if he does not have
children

who patter on their little feet,
stretch tiny hands,
scatter, touch,
grub with mouths
and grab with fingers,
smear rice and ghee
all over their bodies,
and overcome reason with love,

all his days
have come to nothing.

Pāṇṭiyaṉ Aṟivuṭai Nampi, *Puṟanāṉūṟu*, 188
(Ramanujan 1985, 160)

And between lovers—the male eats from the woman's mouth and gets a charge out of it. As I said earlier, Śabari, the old woman in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, waited for years for Rāma and, when he arrived, lovingly fed him fruit that she had bitten into first—to make sure it was sweet enough for Him. *Bhakti* poems go one step further, and ridicule the food/leftovers distinction itself:

Milk is left over
from the calves.
Water is left over
from the fishes,
flowers from the bees.

How can I worship you,
O Śiva, with such offal?
But it's not for me
to despise left-overs,
so take what comes,

lord of the meeting rivers.

Basavaṇṇa, 885 (Ramanujan 1973, 90)

Or, once a social and symbolic distinction between rich and poor foods is recognized, food snobbery becomes a possibility. Proverbs make fun of it: 'The man eats only gruel, but he needs a man to hold up his moustache.' In a Telugu story, a poor man who did not want anyone to know about the poor food he ate, always had a small pot of rice and curds made, and smeared it on his moustache before he came out of the house wiping it off ostentatiously—till one day his little daughter gave it all away by saying loudly, 'Daddy, the cat ate up all your mustache rice today!' (I owe this story to V. Narayana Rao.)

FOOD METAPHORS

As food is such a basic preoccupation of the culture, food metaphors (and parables) occur everywhere. Here are two examples.

Ahmad Shah of Gujarat was defeated and exiled. He could not enter his own city. As he wandered about in exile, he met a *sannyāsī* who gave him a bowl of hot *khicaḍī* (a low food, given at funerals). Ahmad Shah was very hungry. Impatiently, he plunged his fingers right into the *khicaḍī* and scalded them. The *sannyāsī* said, 'When things are that hot, begin at the edge of the pot.' Ahmad Shah saw in that sentence a metaphor for his own military strategy. He befriended neighbouring chieftains on the periphery of his kingdom, and was soon able to regain his city. (Viswajit Pandya, personal communication, 1984)

When the Parsis first came to Gujarat, the king didn't want them to settle there. He had already too many people in the kingdom. So he sent the Parsi community a diplomatic, symbolic message: a full glass of milk, to indicate the glass could contain no more. The Parsis poured a spoonful of sugar into it and stirred it, and sent back the glass of milk: indicating that like sugar they would mix with the population, take no extra space, and sweeten it all. The king was pleased and persuaded. The Parsis came to stay. (Veena Oldenberg, personal communication, 1984)

Food is a frequent metaphor for sex (not unknown elsewhere; for instance, terms of endearment in English like honey, sweetiepie, etc.). In various parts of India, pimps, I have heard, ask likely customers, 'Has the gentleman eaten?' In Telugu, you cannot ask a woman for food, if she is alone, lest the request be misunderstood. The following examples do variations on the theme of food and sex.

1. *Bastu* or *birya* (seed) is generated inside the body of a man and *rati* (the seed of a woman) is generated in the body of a woman after the intake of food. Food is converted into blood, and from the blood itself are generated *birya* and *rati*.
2. Agni without food or fuel becomes finally extinguished and black ashes (*bhasma*), but if it is supplied with its daily food or offering it is converted into the radiant flame of life. Food is called Soma and that represents the female or Mother principle whereas Agni represents the male or Father principle. When Agni is satiated with Soma that is the normal order of Yajña (the sacrifice). In Rudra-Śiva mythology, that is represented as Ardhanārīśvara, the half-male and half-female aspect of Śiva.
3. The demon Ruru with his army attacked the gods, who sought refuge with Devī. She laughed, and an army of goddesses emerged from her mouth. They killed Ruru and his army, but then they were hungry and asked for food. Devī summoned Rudra Paśupati and said, 'You have the form of a goat and you smell like a goat. These ladies will eat your flesh or else they will eat everything, even me.' Śiva said, 'When I pierced the fleeing sacrifice of Dakṣa, which had taken the form of a goat, I obtained the smell of a goat. But let the goddesses eat that which pregnant women have defiled with their touch, and newborn children, and women who cry all the time.' Devī refused this disgusting food, and finally Śiva said, 'I will give you something never tasted by anyone else: the two balls resembling fruits below my navel. Eat the testicles that hang there and be satisfied.' Delighted by this gift, the goddesses praised Śiva.
4. [A man saw a beautiful maiden] and he wanted to devour her, for he had no penis and he could only find pleasure in swallowing. [Mahādeo came there] and between her legs with his nails he made an oval opening. [He made a penis and testicles for the man out of his own thumb and the two swellings on his ears.] The world was saved. (quoted in O'Flaherty 1983, 280–1)

5. When a woman comes close to serve him food, this artful man takes a piece of red doe-meat to his tender lower lip and gently nibbles at it with his front teeth, and the woman smiles shyly turning her face a little away from him.
6. The cool milk is her smile, the sweet *laḍḍus* of her breasts, the jackfruit segments of her lips, and the *pūriṣ* her sāri: the feet seduced the wedding party like a beautiful woman. (from Śrīnātha, c. 1360–1450, *Śṛngāranaishadhamu*, chapters 6, 133, 134; translated from Telugu by V. Narayana Rao)

Food is seen not only as preparation and foreplay, but the sexual act itself is seen as a man feeding a woman and vice versa. In the following passage from a modern novel (Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*), the Ācārya, a long-celibate innocent, is initiated into the four things all animate beings share: food, sex, fear, and sleep. This set of four is another series of which food is a member.

Touching full breasts he had never touched, Praneshacarya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them. The strength in his legs ebbing, Chandri sat the Acarya down, holding him close. The Acarya's hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, 'O Amma!' Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him. Then she took off her sari, spread it on the ground, and lay on it hugging Praneshacarya close to her, weeping, flowing in helpless tears. (Ramanujan 1976, 63–4)

In the Kannada folktale of Hanci, a Cinderella-type story, the young woman is identified with and by a special kind of rice she makes, not by a slipper. In a wife, food and sex, mother and partner meet; a woman has two breasts, so goes a saying, so that she can give one to the husband and the other to her child. (Note how, in the *Samskara* passage, the man first calls his lover 'Amma,' or mother.)

One may add that the Sanskrit root *bhuj* means both 'to eat' and 'to enjoy sex.' In the following story, it means many more things.

THE KARMA EATER

A demon carried off a brahman's wife and abandoned her in the forest. The brahman approached the king and said that someone had carried off his wife while he slept. The king asked him to describe her, and the brahman replied, 'Well, she has piercing eyes and is very tall, with short arms and a thin face. She has a sagging belly and short buttocks and small breasts; she is really very ugly—I'm not blaming her. And she is very harsh in speech, and not gentle in nature; this is how I would describe my wife. She is awful to look at, with a big mouth; and she has passed her prime. This is my wife's appearance, honestly.' The king replied, 'Enough of her; I will give you another wife.' But the brahman

insisted that he needed to protect his own wife. 'For if she is not protected, confusion of castes will arise, and that will cause my ancestors to fall from heaven.' So the king set out to find her.

The king came upon her in the forest and asked her how she got there; she told him her story, concluding, 'I don't know why he did it, as he neither enjoys me carnally nor eats me.' The king found the demon and questioned him about his behaviour: 'Why did you bring the brahman's wife here, night-wanderer? For she is certainly no beauty; you could find many better wives, if you brought her here to be your wife; and if you took her to eat her, then why haven't you eaten her?'

The demon replied, 'We do not eat men; those are other demons. But we eat the fruit of a good deed. (And I can tell you about the fruit of a bad deed, for I have been born as a cruel demon.) Being dishonored, we consume the very nature of men and women; we do not eat meat or devour living creatures. When we eat the patience of men, they become furious; and when we have eaten their evil nature, they become virtuous. We have female demons who are as fascinating and beautiful as the nymphs in heaven; so why would we seek sexual pleasure among human women?' The king said, 'If she is to serve neither your bed nor your table, then why did you enter the brahman's house and take her away?' The demon said, 'He is a very good brahman and knows the spells. He used to expel me from sacrifice after sacrifice by reciting a spell that destroys demons. Because of this, we became hungry, and so we inflicted this defect upon him, for without a wife a man is not qualified to perform the ritual of sacrifice.'

The king said, 'Since you happened to mention that you eat the very nature of a person, let me ask you to do something. Eat the evil disposition of this brahman's wife right away, and when you have eaten her evil disposition, she may become well behaved. Then take her to the house of her husband. By doing this you will have done everything for me who have come to your house.' Then the demon entered inside her by his own *māyā* and ate her evil disposition by his own power, at the king's command. When the brahman's wife was entirely free of that fiercely evil disposition, she said to the king, 'Because of the ripening of the fruits of my own karma, I was separated from my noble husband. The night-wanderer was (merely the proximate) cause. The fault is not his, nor is it the fault of my noble husband; the fault was mine alone, and no one else's. The demon has done a good deed, for in another birth I caused someone to become separated from another, and this (separation from my husband) has now fallen upon me. What fault is there in the noble one?' And the demon took the brahman's wife, whose evil disposition had been purified, and led her to the house of her husband, and then he went away. (*Mārkaṇḍaya Purāṇa*, translated and quoted in O'Flaherty 1981, 30–1)

It is not surprising, given this wide range of straight and oblique uses, that taste and discrimination regarding food is seen as the beginning and, when well-developed, the mark of the sensitive, discriminating man.

TASTE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A young adolescent came to a sage to get educated. The sage accepted him into his household, asked him to work for him and learn from him. He told his wife, 'Do not serve any ghee on his rice when you feed him. Serve him castor oil instead. Let me know when he complains.'

The young man was avid for learning, worked hard for some years. But not once did he complain of the stinking castor oil that was poured on his rice at every meal. He never seemed to notice. After some years, one day he said hesitantly to his *guru*'s wife, '*Amma*, the food tastes strange today; something bitter about it.'

The *guru*'s wife removed the food from his leaf at once, and served him fresh rice with ghee and other things. She also promptly reported this change in the young disciple to her husband, who summoned him and said, 'I hear that you found the rice bitter today, after all these years. Your education is over. You're ready to go out into the world.'

This story is read in two ways. When a man can discriminate between the different tastes, he has learned the basic skills for discrimination in other things as well. Or, all these years the disciple was absorbed in his learning, and did not care about taste; now that he has begun to look for taste in food, he will also be interested in other sensual experiences; so he is ready to go out into the world. How far the sensitivity to taste and flavour can go is suggested by a much older story in the Indian traditions.

THE FASTIDIOUS BRAHMANS

When dinner time came, the king seated the brahmans at the place of honor and ordered a regal dish to be served of sweet rice flavored with all six flavors. When all were eating heartily, one of the brahman youths, the one who was so particular about his food, refused to eat and pinched his nose disgustedly.

'Why don't you eat, brahman?' asked the king softly. 'The dish is quite tasty and well flavored.'

The brahman whispered back, 'Your Majesty, there is a definite smell of burnt corpses about the cooked rice, and tasty though the dish may be, I can't possibly eat it.'

The king ordered everyone to smell the food, but they all said that the rice, which was of a special kind, was perfect and smelled delicious. Nevertheless, the fastidious youth kept his nose covered and refused to eat. Having thought about it, the king made investigations, and he discovered from the cooks that the dish had been prepared with rice that had been grown on an acre near the burning ground of a village.

Most surprised and pleased, the king said to the youth: 'You are indeed sensitive about your food! You must eat something else.'

After dinner, when the three brahmans had gone off to their rooms inside the palace, the king had a most beautiful concubine from his own seraglio brought in to him and sent the perfectly shaped and gorgeously adorned woman at nightfall to the second brahman who was so fastidious about his women. Accompanied by the king's flunkeys she came to his bedchamber, and, with her face as radiant as moonbeams, she seemed to be the very torchbearer of the God of Love. But when she entered the room, which she brightened with her splendor, the fastidious youth, pressing his left hand to his nose and nearly fainting, groaned. 'Drag her out. I shall die if she stays! She smells like a goat.'

The flunkeys took the exasperated courtesan along to the king, and told him what had happened. The king summoned the fastidious brahman and said: 'This courtesan moves in clouds of the pleasantest perfumes, and she has scented herself with the best musk and camphor and aloe, and yet you declare that she smells like a goat!' But in spite of the king's assurances the fastidious youth did not give in, and the king began to have his doubts. He inquired and coaxed the courtesan herself into revealing that, when she was a child, she had neither mother nor wet nurse and had been brought up on goat's milk. The king was amazed and praised the fastidiousness of the fastidious brahman. (Van Buitenen 1959, 21–2)

Rasa or taste (as in English) is also the basic metaphor for aesthetic experience: *ruci* or taste, *asvāda* or eating, and *rasika*, meaning both gourmet and sensitive man, are part of the technical vocabulary of poetics. As with food, Indian aesthetics would insist that the experience is in the experiencer: 'Just as a taste (like sweetness) is created by the combination of different ingredients, a *rasa* (aesthetic) "flavour" is created by the combination of different *bhāvas* or "affects". '

I would like to close this little anthology with a widely-told childhood story, which places the giving of food in the context of other gifts, those of daughters (in marriage), of wealth, and of knowledge: all these facilitate the cycles of life. Of all these, the gift of food is the best. The folktale also connects this cycle with the other great Hindu cycle, the cycle of karma, of action and consequence.

THE GIFT OF FOOD

A widowed mother and her little son lived together. The mother used to work for neighbouring women, sweep their floors and scrub their pots. She earned very little but gave away part of what little she earned, and lived on the rest. If too many beggars came to her door, she would save only her son's portion and give away her own food. Her gifts of food were beginning to be famous. The boy grew up and became a young man in such a household. He wondered about his mother struggling to make a living and struggling even more to give away most of her food. If only she didn't just give away so much food every day, she could be comfortable. She might even have been rich.

One day he asked her, '*Avva*, why do you do this? You give away everything you bring home. What's the point of giving away food left and right like that?'

She answered, 'Of all gifts, the gift of food is the best. Riches and poverty are like night and day. They come and go. But if one gives to the poor whatever one can, the merit of such a deed will follow one wherever one goes. Your merit is greater than the rupees you earn.'

'What do you mean by "merit"? What's the measure of this merit you're earning by giving food away?' he asked in turn.

'A mortal woman like me can't explain merit, especially the merit of giving food away. Only god knows about such things. Go ask him,' she said.

The young man said, 'Well then, I will,' and with his mother's blessings he went to talk to god.

He walked far and went through a dense jungle, through trees and underbrush, clambered up several hills and down into valleys. By then it was evening. He didn't know what to do next. Just then a hunter came that way and took pity on the young fellow, who would soon be at the mercy of lions and tigers.

He said, 'Young man, it's getting dark. Don't walk about in this jungle. It's full of snakes, tigers, and lions. You'll soon hear the tigers roar. Come stay tonight in our hut and go in the morning.'

The young man was waiting for just such an invitation. He went with the hunter. When they reached the hut, the hunter said to his wife, 'This boy had lost his way in the jungle. I brought him home. He'll stay the night and leave in the morning. He's hungry. Give him some milk and fruit.'

She replied, 'I can't do anything of the kind. Give him your portion if you want to.'

He gave the young fellow some of his own fruit and milk, and asked him to go to bed. 'You must be sore and tired,' he said, and massaged the young man's legs. Then he made a bed for his guest with old rags.

As there wasn't enough room in the hut, the man slept outside with his head on the threshold. That night a tiger came to his door, and ate up the hunter who was sleeping with half his body outside the hut. The taste of blood whetted his appetite. So he entered the hut and devoured the hunter's wife as well. His stomach was too full to take in any more. So he didn't touch the sleeping young man.

When the young man woke up next morning, he saw the shambles all around him—pools of blood, and his hosts' bones. 'How terrible! How unfair! Alive yesterday, and dead this morning!' he cried, and did his best to bury their remains in that deserted place, and moved on.

On the way, he met a king who sat with his head in his hands. The king asked the traveller, 'Brother, where are you going?'

'I'm going to talk to god and ask him a question.'

'If you're doing that, will you ask him a question for me too?'

'What question?'

'Look, I spent a crore of rupees to build a tank for this town. There's not a drop of water in it. Will you find out why? God will surely know, if anybody does.'

The young man agreed, and moved on.

Very soon he met a cripple. He too had a question. 'Will you ask god why I'm lame?'

In the next lap of his journey, he saw a snake-hole with a snake stuck half-way in it, unable to move forwards or backwards. When the snake heard of the young man's errand, it too asked him for a favour. 'Will you ask god the reason for my plight?'

'Yes, I will,' replied the young man.

He walked and walked and went all the way to Kailāśa mountain, the abode of Śiva. Śiva and his consort Pārvati sat there, chewing betelnut.

He fell at their feet and asked, 'Lord Śiva, you must explain to me the merit one earns by giving away food.'

Śiva said, 'I'll send you to someone who'll explain it to you. King Sitala's wife is pregnant. When you take my *prasāda* to her, she'll give birth to a baby. Ask that baby. He'll tell you what one gets out of giving away food.'

'Before I go away, I have to ask you one or two things.'

'Go ahead and ask.'

So the young man asked Śiva why the king's tank did not have even one drop of water in it.

The Lord of All Things answered, 'The king has a grown-up daughter he hasn't given away. He must find her a suitable bridegroom and give her away in marriage. Then water will flow into his tank.'

'Why has the cripple lost his legs?'

'He has all kinds of knowledge in his possession. If he gives it away to someone, he'll regain his legs.'

'I saw a snake who can't go in or come out of his hole. Why can't he?'

'If he gives away the jewel in his head to someone, he'll be able to move freely.'

After getting all his answers (except the one he came for), he fell at the feet of Śiva and Pārvati, took their *prasāda*, and started his return journey.

He met the snake first. 'Did you ask god my question?' it asked.

'Yes. I did. It seems that you have in your head some kind of jewel. If you give it away to someone, you'll move about freely.'

'Then you'd better take it yourself,' said the snake, and gave him the jewel in his hood. At once, the snake was filled with energy and began to move. In its delight, it spread its hood and danced a dance peculiar to snakes.

Then the young traveller met the cripple. 'Did you ask Śiva my question?'

'Yes, I did. If you are willing to give the knowledge you have to someone who deserves it, your legs will be alright.'

'Who deserves it more than you?' said the cripple at once. And he transferred all his learning, his sixty-four kinds of knowledge, to the young man in a ritual of transfer, pouring holy water on his hands. His legs grew strong again, and he danced a dance of joy.

The king, who still had his head buried in his hands, got up as soon as he saw the young man on the road. 'Did you ask my question?' he asked.

'Yes, of course. You've a grown-up menstruating daughter, don't you? You must give her away in marriage to a suitable bridegroom, and your tank will overflow with water.'

'Who's more suitable than you? Come, marry my daughter,' said the king, and married off his daughter to the young man. Even before the wedding music had faded, they could hear the springs in the tank bubble up and come alive. By morning, the tank was gleaming, overflowing with water.

The young man moved on, with his new wife, his sixty-four kinds of learning, and his serpent jewel, and came to the country of Sitala, still seeking an answer to his first question. The king's pregnant wife was in great agony, unable to give birth. When he went to the palace and gave Śiva's *prasāda* to the queen, her labor eased at once and she quickly gave birth to a boy. Then the young man asked the delighted king for a favour.

'I need to ask the newborn baby a question. Could you please ask someone to bring the baby here?'

Maids brought the baby on a golden platter.

'The Lord of All Things has sent me to you. What's the merit one earns by giving away food?'

The baby on the platter laughed. The laughter was like nothing on earth.

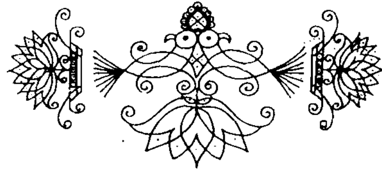
'You went all the way to see Śiva and still you don't understand. Remember? On your way to see Śiva, you lost your way in a forest. Then a hunter took you home and gave you some fruit and milk. Remember that?'

'Oh yes, I remember. Very well. But they were killed!'

'Yes. I was that hunter. That night, a tiger devoured me. But because I gave you some food, I've been reborn now as a king's son. My wife refused to part with her food, and do you know where she is? She has been reborn in this very town as a pig. Go and check for yourself, if you wish,' said the newborn baby.

Then the young man returned home and he too began to give away food to the poor every day. (Kannada folktale, Type 460–1B; from Ramanujan's fieldnotes, 1968)

Language and Social Change: The Tamil Example



INTRODUCTION

A sociolinguistic investigation seeks covariants between linguistic and non-linguistic patterns in a community. The search for the linguistic correlates of 'social change', 'modernisation' or 'regionalism' is such an investigation.

Such inquiry should take into account not only language structure but language events and language use. Neither should such an inquiry be limited to language alone but should be conducted in the context of the total communication media of a culture—both verbal and non-verbal. Under the non-verbal, one may include not only things like gesture and posture, but such 'near-media' as clothes and caste-marks, residence patterns and interior arrangements, what is eaten and when—in what combinations and what order, how the members of the community wear their hair on the face or on the head, and how they shave it, and their characteristic uses of time and space. All these have their codes, their communicative functions. Enmeshed in this communicative network is language activity.

In this descriptive paper I shall confine my attention to language, drawing most of my examples from Tamil, especially from the Tamil dialects spoken in the state of Madras (now Tamil Nadu) in south India.

For the purposes of this paper, I will equate the 'modern' with what is recent. By 'recent' I mean the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, which would allow me to look at a few of the changes that have taken place in Tamil country with regard to the language and its uses.

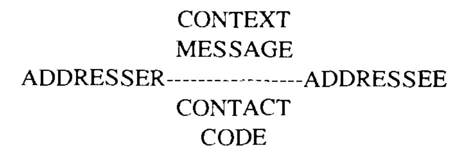
My sources of information for the earlier periods will be an early novel (Pillai 1879), the autobiography of a great Tamil scholar (Cāminātaiyar 1958), a history of nineteenth-century literary culture written in

Tamil (Vēnkaṭacāmi 1962) and the Tamil Encyclopedia; for contemporary Tamil, I shall rely on my own and fellow linguists' observations in the field.

A HEURISTIC SCHEME

To give clarity and sequence to the discussion, I shall employ a programmatic heuristic framework. In the language economy of any community three points may be usefully separated: (*a*) language events, (*b*) constituent factors of the language events, and (*c*) the functions of the factors (following Hymes 1962, 24). Several schemes are available for the description of factors and functions, but I shall use Roman Jakobson's because it is the simplest. In his own words,

> Language must be investigated in all its functions. An outline of these functions demands a concise survey of the constituent factors in any speech event. . . . The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ('referent' in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalised; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee . . .; and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. All these factors . . . may be schematised as follows:



(Jakobson 1960, 353)

Further subdivisions are always possible and often useful. The message may be further divided into form and content and given names like Message Form (e.g., prose, verse) and Topic (which would include a study of the lexicon, indigenous categories of topics, etc.). Context may be further distributed into setting (scene or situation) and parts of Topic, so that the Referential aspect is distinguished from the Contextual/Situational (Hymes 1962). Blom and Gumpers (1967) would further distinguish, in Context, a Setting or Locale (home or office), a social situation and a social event (e.g., wedding or election speech), the latter having a definite sequential structure with defined 'openers' and 'closers'.

Questions like 'Who said it? Who did he say it to? Did he phone or

write? Was it in English or Tamil? What did he talk about? Where and when did he say it?' would be the eliciting questions for the factors respectively (Hymes 1962).

Society encloses natural language at both ends—at the transmitting end and the receiving end, there are speakers and addressees. Language itself has a 'channel' or medium, a 'code', and a 'message'. Among these factors, the code (or grammatical system) is the most autonomous and the most impervious to social change—hence the meagre results in any frontal attack on the problem of relating directly code structure to social structure or code change to social change. When Sapir spoke of language as being 'probably the most self-contained, the most massively resistant of all social phenomena' (Sapir 1921, 206), he spoke chiefly of language code, not language use. Still, not all parts of the code are equally 'resistant' to social change. Speakers may use certain portions of the code for specific social purposes, e.g., the pronouns, which involve speaker/listener relations, differences of status, ways of address, etc. Social conditions might be thought of as triggering certain kinds of code change—for instance, the effects of prestige dialects, the importance of courts, contact with a foreign language, or social stratification by caste, class or profession.

Each of the six (or seven, according to Hymes) factors mentioned above determines a different function of language.

We may set out the six (or seven) broad factors and the corresponding functions in a table, thus:

Factor	*Function*
1. Sender (or addresser)	Expressive (or emotive)
2. Receiver (or addressee)	Directive (conative, pragmatic, persuasive, rhetorical)
3. Message (or text)	Poetic
4. Channel (medium)	Contact (phatic)
5. Code	Metalingual (metalinguistic)
6. Context	Contextual (situational)
7. Reference	Referential

Hymes illustrates the functions most tellingly:

'You say it with such feeling' points to expressive function . . . 'Do as I say, not do as I do' points to directive function . . . 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed' points to poetic function, focussed on message form . . . 'If only I could talk it instead of having to write it' and 'Can you hear me?' point to contact function . . . 'Go look it up in the dictionary' points to metalinguistic function, to concern with the code underlying communication . . . 'What are you going to talk about?', 'What did he have to say?' focus on the topic and the referential function . . . 'As mentioned above' 'You can't talk like that here!' . . . are primarily contextual in function. . . . (Hymes 1962; 31)

Both Jakobson and Hymes rightly insist that all the factors of the speech event, as well as all the features of the linguistic code, may participate in all of the functions. When analysing a speech situation in such broadly suggestive terms, the interdependence, the interaction among the features should be constantly kept in view. You may make one a fictitious constant and vary the others; or focus attention on one variable and scrutinise the covariants. Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity suggests that the code affects the referential aspect of language; Marshal McLuhan in works like *The Gutenberg Galaxy* insists that a change of medium changes everything else: sender, receiver, form and content of message, code, context. Such one-determinant theories overstate their cases and assume attractively simple one-way determinisms instead of more complex models of interaction and 'feedback'.

There are restrictions on the co-occurrence of elements. In the context of a Tamil schoolroom, the sender and receiver cannot interchange parts; the code shifts from formal to informal according to the topic; the metalinguistic function, i.e., the use of language to talk about language, as in definitions, glosses, etc., may predominate. The oral medium has a different code or grammar from the written medium in Tamil, and carries with it certain contexts. Certain language events like an election speech have obvious built-in restrictions on the code, the message form, the sender/receiver relationships.

The same element might have multiple functions. For instance, a Drāviḍa Munnēṟṟa Kaṟkam speaker typically uses a great many alliterative chains in his political speeches; if a sentence begins with a particular sound all the words in the sentence tend to have the same sound at their beginnings. He uses racy local proverbs as well as ancient literary allusions. Devices like alliteration and allusion refer back to a consciousness of Tamil play with its sounds, exploit the history of the language and literary heritage, and emphasise the variety of speech forms from the archaic or literary to the colloquial, folksy and spicy. Such uses heighten the *metalinguistic function* of the utterance. Further, such metalinguistic devices like quotation and alliteration tend to enforce language loyalty, make for a sense of community, *phatic* communion. They are also enjoyed for their own sake, for the 'beauty of DMK language', thus serving a *poetic* function; ending, hopefully, in vote-getting *directive* function.

While all these elements and functions are found elsewhere in Tamil in the past, the particular complex of functions is new, 'modern'.

Let me, without any claim to systematic exhaustion of possibilities, give a few examples of factors and related functions.

SENDER/RECEIVER. *Names.* Both senders and receivers, as well as the places and persons they speak of, have names. Names identify people not only as individuals but also as members of a class or caste, or as hailing from a certain region; they are referential, informative in a number of ways: a name like Pālghāṭ Subramaṇya Iyer was (still is) typical. It consists of a place name, a personal name and a caste name, in that order. I shall not go into all the relevant details of address forms, nicknames, who in the community uses which part or version of the name; I shall only mention that today in cities only the middle personal name tends to be used even on formal occasions; the place name is abbreviated to an initial letter like P., the caste-marking name omitted entirely, like the caste-marks themselves on the forehead (Śaivite sacred ash or Vaiṣṇavite trident). A name like Subramaṇyam is still *expressive*, in that it tells us that the bearer is not a Vaiṣṇava. Secular names are coming into vogue; names of political leaders like Gandhi, Jawahar, Subhash, are used as nicknames as well as full names. The names of film stars (instead of the names of real stars or of gods and heroes, or the names of characters in Bengali novels in an earlier generation) are given to children: Rāgiṇi, Dilip, Vaijayanti, in themselves very traditional Sanskrit names, reintroduced by new linguistic events like the movies, or the translation of Hindi, Marathi or Bengali novels, or the vogue for Tagore's poetry. Note how these new naming practices erode not only personal identification but also regional identification. A name like Śivāji, not originally common in Tamilnad, might become frequent with the success of an actor who gained fame in the role of the Maharashtrian hero. Nationalistic motives have changed the names of cities, suburbs, streets: cities all over the country have suburbs named Gandhinagar. Hardwicke Square might become Subhash Circle, Viceroy Road might become Rani Jhansi Road. Spellings and pronunciations get de-anglicised and get fitted closer to the language of the region: Seriangapatam is now Srirangapatṇa in the Kannada-speaking Mysore state (now Karnataka). Railway stations have boards in English and Tamil. Places of pilgrimage may have them in Hindi and Gujarati as well, reflecting the language affiliations of pilgrims. Names are thus ceasing to be expressive of caste and beginning to indicate ideology: the rejection of imperialist English, or rejection of pan-Indian Sanskrit or 'north Indian' Hindi. A Madras Minister had Neduñjaṟian as his name, the name of a great Pāṇḍya king, celebrated in classical Tamil literature and legend. An influential Tamil purist writer and religious man changed his name from Swāmi Vedācalam by loan-translation to Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ (Skt. Veda = Ta. maṟai, Skt. acala = Ta. malai, Skt. Swāmi = Ta. aṭikaḷ). Note that both the names taken have ṟ and ṛ, the much-vaunted Tamil phonemes not found in other Indian languages (except in Malayāḷam)—of which zealous Tamils wax very proud, though one is only written and in most dialects never pronounced (ṟ), and the other (ṛ) is confined to formal speech and some dialects only. In these cases common or traditional names have been 'fore-grounded', 'de-automatised', refreshed, the etymology recovered by loan-translation—all of them serving poetic functions, and focusing attention on the Tamilness of Tamil names. The 'modern' trend of secularisation, the legal levelling of castes, is also indicated. Some curious instances were found in Kerala some twenty years ago; on the rolls of a progressive low-caste college were several instances of names like Joseph Stalin, Karl Marx, Kalidas or Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. In the Kannada area, local names have been sanskritised. Doddayya 'Hefty', or Kempayya 'the Ruddy One', are lower caste names descriptive originally of physical attributes; they were and are often changed to Sanskrit names like Padmanābhan.

Further, personal names began to be used as family names, wife and children taking the husband's or father's name, in the manner of other parts of India or the West. This, though still not widespread in Tamilnad, reflects wider contacts, the movement away from a face-to-face to an urban society. The two-name pattern, as in Tom Jones, or Dilip Sen or Saroja Murthi, allows for a new practice of having two names, a public family name like Jones, Sen or Murthi and a personal name used in intimate circles. Formerly a caste name, like Piḷḷai or Ayyar, was used by the 'outer' circle, the middle personal name or an abbreviated form (e.g., Subbu for Subrahmaṇyan) was used by the 'inner' circle.

MEDIUM OR 'CHANNEL': *Speaking, writing, printing.* The most important 'new' channel, of course, is printing—to which are related, however obliquely, new linguistic events like newspapers, textbooks, and new message forms like journalistic prose and large cheap novels (cheap, probably in both senses). Without going McLuhan, we should recognise at once that a change of media is important chiefly because it changes the relationship of sender and receiver. Printing made it possible for a few senders to address large numbers of receivers, changing the numerical ratio of senders and receivers. Writing and print also rendered the message autotelic, self-propelling, independent of the author. In the oral

tradition, not only did the sender often compose the message while he communicated it; the message was physically a part of the sender. With writing, these relationships between composition and communication, between the author and the message, are radically changed. It also changed the attention span of the receiver to the message. The message was replicable, it could be held at arm's length and examined again and again. If you didn't dig the message, you could read it at your own pace.

Before books were printed, books were written down by scribes on palm-leaves with a metal stylus. (I shall ignore other kinds of inscription like rock edicts and copper plates and the problems that are peculiar to them.) In a scribal tradition, by the nature of the palm-leaf manuscript, not everything is or can be committed to writing. Few can read and write. Few possess actual books, for copying is a special art and an expensive one. The society that went with the scribal tradition might be described as 'proto-literate' or 'oligo-literate' (Goody and Watt 1963, 313). Such an 'oligo-literate' society is well illustrated in a passage from the very first novel written in Tamil in 1879 by Vetāṉāyakam Piḷḷai (1826–89), who like several of the earlier nineteenth century Tamil writers, was a Christian convert; he was also a *munsif* in a court, travelled professionally, was exposed to different strata of society both vertically and horizontally. (It is not surprising that judges and travelling civil servants with their learning and intimate knowledge of 'life' were the first to attempt realistic novels in most of the regional languages.) The first chapter of the novel describes the education of the hero Piratāpa Mutali.

> Ever since I was five years old my mother tried to educate me, but her efforts were in vain. My father put it off, saying everytime, 'He is too young for it, he is too young'. I didn't know a single letter of the alphabet till I stood tiptoe and peeped over my eighth year. My father, unable to bear my mother's pesterings, called me aside one day and talked to me: 'Your mother wants to send you to school. What do you think?' I looked at him and said, 'Father, should I also study? Isn't my natural intelligence enough? It's all right for poor people to study—why should I study, where's the need? If something is to be read, or written, don't we have servants? don't we have clerks who will do it for us?' I didn't think of all this myself. My grandmother used to say such things often; I'd heard them and learned to say them just as she did. (Vetāṉāyakam Piḷḷai 1879, 4–5)

Reminiscent as this is of decadent aristocratic aesthetes of nineteenth-century France ('As for living, our servants will do it for us'), the specialisation of literacy is well illustrated by it. The next page also illustrates the consciousness in the nineteenth century among people like Piḷḷai that there was something wrong with Indian illiteracy. For as you turn the page the reformist mother comes along and lectures her little son about everyone's need for literacy and study. 'learning or lack of it differentiates the lowest classes and the animals from all the upper classes; the poor have no time to study; a rich man can't earn the respect of the poor unless he is really more learned than they' (6).

The scribes and the scholars who had custody of the manuscripts limited the transmission of knowledge in curious and unexpected ways. Though some of this can be guessed at, records like U. Ve. Cāmiṉātaiyar's *En Carittiram* (My Story), the extraordinary autobiography of a Tamil scholar, are especially vivid witnesses. Cāmiṉātaiyar (1855–1942) lived in the transition period of the later nineteenth century when both paper and palm-leaf were used. He was himself responsible in crucial ways for making possible the transition. For instance, he edited and printed the most important and inaccessible of ancient manuscripts. The great Caṅkam texts of classical Tamil literature, including the *Eight Anthologies* of love and war poetry (Ramanujan 1967) and the *Cilappatikāram* (Danielou 1962), were entirely inaccessible to most scholars all through the early nineteenth century, though they were well known and commented upon in the early eighteenth. The eighteenth-century Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite scholars apparently tabooed as irreligious all secular texts which included the earliest and the greatest of Tamil literary texts; they disallowed from study all Jain and Buddhist texts, which included the great epic *Cilappatikāram*. Under this intellectual taboo, a great scholar like Cāmiṉātaiyar had to give his nights and days to second-rate religious and grammatical texts of the medieval period. He was entirely unaware even of the existence of the twin epics and the breathtaking poetic anthologies of Tamil literature, till he met a liberal-minded *munsif* named Rāmacuvami Mutaliyār. He records the date as 21 October 1880, a Thursday—and all students of Tamil literature should think of that date as 'etched in red letters'. The *munsif* had just been transferred to Kumpakōṇam. Cāmiṉātaiyar says that his own merit and the good fortune of his past lives took him there, and opened up a new life for him. Mutaliyār asked Cāmiṉātaiyar under whom he studied and what. When Aiyar gave him a list of all the *purāṇas* and religious poems and grammars he had slogged at—Mutaliyār said 'That's all? What use is all that? Have you studied any of the old texts? *Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi*, *Cilappatikāram*—have you read them?' Aiyar, the most influential and probably the most thoroughgoing of nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamil scholars, was aghast that he had not even heard of them. Mutaliyār gave him a handwritten manuscript to take home and read. Cāmiṉātaiyar devoted the

rest of his life to unearthing, editing and printing the greatest of Tamil literary texts, the Caṅkam works (Cāmiṉātaiyar 1958, 326–43).

Another scholar, Ci. Cay. Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai, who printed for the first time in 1887 a late Caṅkam text, described the difference between a palm-leaf and print graphically in his preface:

> Only what has escaped fire and water (and religious taboo) remains, even of that, termites and the bug named Rāma's Arrow take some part; the third element, earth, has its share. . . . When you lift a manuscript, the edge breaks; when you untie the knot, the leaf cracks; when you turn a leaf, it breaks in half. (quoted in Venkatacāmi 1962, 109)

According to Vēṅkaṭacāmi, unprinted texts in manuscript were lost within a scholar's memory or became available only in parts, the strings untied and the other parts lost (110–11).

Even when manuscripts were available they had many errors and textual differences from copy to copy. Only some Tamil scholars and Śaivite monasteries protected and preserved the texts they liked. Some kings and rich men arranged for copies to be made, when the manuscripts became old and fell apart. The scribes had to be well-chosen and well-paid. Among rich Jains, there was a practice of *Śāstradānam*, of giving new copies of old religious manuscripts as gifts to scholars on occasions like weddings. Thus, precariously, expensively, accidentally, was knowledge transmitted in written language. Regarding the expense, the Christian scholar, Rev. P. Percival, said that he bought Fr. Beschi's *Caturakarāti* in palm-leaf for 10 pounds before 1835; when it was printed later he could get it for 2$^1/_2$ shillings (Veṅkaṭacāmi 1962, 114).

In those days, if someone wished to read a book he had to go in search of it; manuscript owners did not lend them out, for good reason. They were guarded like treasures and passed on from generation to generation in the family like heirlooms till some ignoramus threw it as a peace-offering to angry floods or lighted the kitchen fire with it. One reason for the entire absence of any Buddhist manuscripts in the Tamil area is that no one preserved them or copied them, after the Hindu Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites triumphed over Buddhism. Each community studied its own texts. Furthermore, if a Śaivite scribe copied a Jain text, important emendations were likely to be made. Thus the very tradition of classical literature, which is the pride of all the Tamils today, was only partially conserved and precariously transmitted.

The extent to which the palm-leaf manuscripts were intimately tied up with the caste-system is not always realised. Teachers were specialists in certain texts, and a scholar roamed from teacher to teacher. Some teachers did not take students of religious persuasions other than their own, though there were startling exceptions. Or if they were liberal enough to do so, the young scholar had often to change his name at least. A scholar with a Vaiṣṇava name, Veṅkaṭarāman, changes his name willingly to Cāminātan, a Śaivite name, to please his Śaivite *guru*. This is the same Cāmiṉātaiyar whom we mentioned before. Another, who wished to study Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇam* with a Vaiṣṇavite scholar had to change his name from Ṣaṇmukam to Rāmānujan, and change the caste marks on his forehead and body from (Śaivite) sacred ash to the (Vaiṣṇavite) white-and-ochre trident (Vēṅkaṭacāmi 1962, 87).

Thus the channel or the medium of the palm leaf carried with it a whole oligo-literate caste-enforcing class. There is no need to point out that printing and the free inexpensive availability of texts made for democratic education. But it did not happen all at once. As early scribes carried over features of the oral tradition, early printing carried for a while the characteristics of the scribal. For instance, like the scribes, the early printers too made only few copies, changed texts, introduced prayers to Śiva into Vaiṣṇavite texts.

The scribal tradition also fostered reading aloud to audience and to oneself. One of the consequences of this practice of converting the written to the oral, of course, was a slowing-down of the reading process. It is well known that reading is slow when tied down to vocalization; when released from the need to articulate vocally, hundreds of pages can be read effortlessly. Printing brought to books different size-units, different habits of reading and comprehension. A modern daily newspaper, or the large turnover of longer fiction, would have been impossible without silent reading. Fast silent reading, one needn't point out, has effects on the style, the spacing of ideas, and the whole rhetoric of exposition.

SCRIBE AND SCRIPT. This is probably the place to speak of script and script reform. Till printing became fairly common in the nineteenth century, the Tamil script was not standardised. In every century, the forms of the letters appear changed. Furthermore, in a scribal culture, the 'redundancy' can be low; the reader is intensely literate and knows his text by heart half the time. The exercise and the 'art of memory' is a concomitant of oral transmission. Early script is a kind of mnemonic as well as a record. The act of writing with a stylus on a palm-leaf necessitated a cursive script, with few dots—for the scribe was loath to lift his stylus from the leaf. Consequently, many diacritics were omitted, making the script ambiguous. For example, a diacritic dot on a consonant

letter makes distinctions possible among *k*, *ka*, *kaka* and *kka*. Yet on palm-leaves and in early printing the dots were omitted. And there was no punctuation. The lack of word-division encouraged certain kinds of literary figures, like the sentence-pun: a sick joke like 'What do we have for dinner? Mother?' is a natural in an unpunctuated script; both the oral and punctuated media have to refer back to it. In speech, patterns of intonation make possible only one of the meanings possible at each utterance; in writing, the punctuation disambiguates the sentences, cancelling out other potential word-divisions. But in the continuous unpunctuated writing on palm-leaves where no spaces indicate word divisions, two or more syntactic patterns may converge on a single string of letters. A whole genre of poems, where the letters spell out two different messages when word-divisions are differently made, has gone out of fashion with printing, punctuation and word-division, except in jokes like the one above.

A.L. Basham writes,

> The climax of the tendency came with the *dvyāśrayakāvya*, telling two stories simultaneously, by deliberately utilizing the ambiguity of words and phrases. A well-known example of this genre is the *Rāmacarita* ('The Deeds of Rama') of the 12th century poet Sandhyākara, which may be read as applying either to the legendary Rāma of Ayodhyā or to the historical king Rāmapāla of Bengal, who was the poet's contemporary and patron. (Basham 1954, 424)

In alphabetic script reform the basic principle is one symbol for one phonological referent, wherever possible. A transcription symbol may be considered an instruction for pronunciation; such instructions have to be unambiguous. Thanks to an eighteenth-century reform by Fr. Beschi which distinguished long and short e and o and thanks to the dots on the consonants which came in with printing, Tamil letters (12 vowels, 18 consonants, one possibly morphophonemic symbol, and 216 combinations of consonant + vowel, totalling 247) were quite adequate to represent all native Tamil words, which have voiced or fricative phonemes only in certain predictable positions. With the advent of English, Perso-Arabic and other words, this one-to-one ratio has been somewhat disturbed. Minor adjustments have been made in words like *flu*.

MESSAGE FORM

With the coming of printing, new 'message forms' come into vogue, the most important of which is prose. New language events appear like the newspaper and the textbook. Prose writings did exist in earlier Tamil, especially the lucid expository prose of the commentaries. Yet prose

never had the functions, the topics, and the participation in new kinds of linguistic events as in the modern era. Winslow, in the Preface to his Tamil-English dictionary in 1862, wrote: 'Its (Tamil) prose style is yet in a forming state and will repay the labour of accurate scholars in moulding it properly. Many natives who write Poetry easily, cannot write a page of correct prose.' The first prose grammars were written at the instance of the English East India Company which offered a prize for a prose grammar for Tamil prose written for English learners. In an elementary grammar written in 1852 in Tamil, the author wrote:

> The Englishmen who now rule this country have given up teaching grammar, literature, mathematics, and astronomy in verse and do it in clear prose. So the children of their country can learn things in a short time and become skilled in the professions. In this country, they were written even for children in difficult verse and had to be unravelled with the help of dictionaries and commentaries, which retards greatly the learning of any profession. To make the children of this country learn anything quickly, it would be good to write lucid texts for use in schools in the simple language of worldly usage.

That was a revolution indeed, brought about by various means, the printing press and the Englishman's example being of course the most important. The ratio between verse and prose in writing was reversed in the nineteenth century.

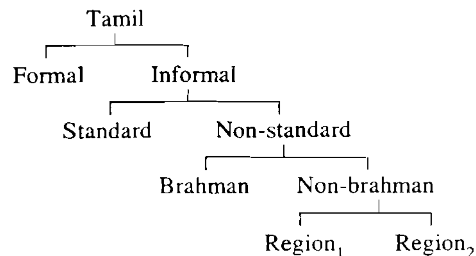
CONTEXT-RELATED CODE: DIGLOSSIA

Even in the oral medium, two clear codes or dialects coexisted in Tamil from antiquity: a *formal* high style and an *informal* colloquial style. This coexistence within the same speaker, often called 'diglossia', is characteristic of many traditional societies (Ferguson 1959). Certain speech settings like the platform, or addressees like the king, or topics like philosophy called for the high style. Certain other speech events like domestic conversation, addressees like children or servants, and topics like gossip or abuse called for the colloquial style. A great majority of people probably had only the colloquial; in learned discourse, the texts read out would be in the high style and the oral exposition could be in colloquial 'low' style. Diglossia carries with it a whole set of attitudes to literature and society, and in the long Tamil tradition of writing one finds little written in the colloquial style (except in the oral compositions of the 'anti-establishment' *bhakti* saints and some rather illiterate inscriptions on rocks). Now a 'merger' is taking place, thanks to the humorous magazine, the play, the film and the literary needs of novelists. Whole novels, like *Putra* by Lā. Cā. Rāmāmrutam, and most plays on contemporary

themes are written in adapted colloquial without any attempt at the high style. Many colloquial expressions and spellings like *aaccu, irukku*, previously unacceptable, are creeping into serious writing. *Local* and *caste variants* which are going out in a number of other ways are being employed as expressive devices for humour and vividness (for details, see Pillai 1965). This is unprecedented except in unwritten folk-composition.

On the other hand, a new *standard colloquial* is clearly in the making—coming into being not by conscious committee-sponsored standardising, but by a convergence of several factors. Among these standardising factors must be counted the mobility and mixing of people of different sub-regions and castes, especially in urban areas, settings like the school, the railway train, the political meeting and the office, and the exposure of all classes to the same mass media like the film and the newspaper.

In Tamil there are four kinds of variations in dialects: formal/informal, standard/non-standard, brahman/others, region$_1$/region$_2$/. . . region$_n$. Their hierarchical relations may be arranged diagrammatically as follows:



Observe that distinctions are made only in the rightward branches. The leftward branches successively represent (except in the last division) speech varieties of greater generality than the rightward. In the former, several distinctions are neutralised. For instance, in formal/written Tamil, there are no clear cut regional or caste variations—except, as mentioned above, in the dialogue employed in novels, plays, etc., where a mixture of formal and informal may be used. In the standard colloquial, caste and regional differences tend to be lost. It is true that the colloquial standard may be identified fairly with the central high-caste non-brahman dialects of Tamilnad. But both brahman and outcaste groups as well as people further north and further south, seem to be adopting the 'middle' dialect for use in all informal situations—relegating their special local or subgroup dialects to intra-group uses as within the family or in meetings between intimates of the same small town.

One need not say anything here about regional dialects except that some of the dialect divisions we recognise today have been stable for at least 2,000 years. The *Tolkāppiyam*, the earliest Tamil grammar, mentions the existence of dialects; commentators outline them and give the characteristic lexical items for these dialects (see Meenakshisundaran 1965, 195–8).

On the whole, the brahman dialects are less prone to sub-regional variation than the non-brahman ones (see diagram above), probably because they are a minority, more mobile, more self-consciously conservative in their verbal habits, etc. Their dialect is strongly marked by characteristic phonological, grammatical and lexical features (Ramanujan 1968). But among the non-brahman dialects, though a Chettiyar speaks somewhat differently from a Vellala, the regional elements predominate. Lately, as myself and other observers like Pillai and Zvelebil have remarked, a new colloquial standard is developing in Tamilnad, characterised by a phonology and morphology simpler than either the brahman or the formal dialects, and with few caste-marked or region-marked features. For instance, for formal *paarkkiratu*, the following dialect forms obtain:

1. Brahman (all regions	*paakk(a)radu*	'it sees'
2. Non-brahman: Madras to Madurai	*paakkudu*	'it sees'
3. Non-brahman: Nagerkoil	*paakku*	'it sees'

The forms that a brahman speaking to a non-brahman would use, or a non-brahman of one area to another, or the characters in a social film would be neither 1 nor 3 but 2, which is the least *marked* of all the forms, and makes for smooth communication.

Another important feature of his common standard colloquial dialect appears to be an analogical levelling (common to many non-brahman dialects) which simplifies the paradigm: e.g., the ending in the three dialects below.

Formal	*Brahman*	*Standard Colloquial* (based on central non-brahman dialects)	
vantatu	*vantutu*	*vanduccu*	'it came'
poyirru	*pooccu*	*pooccu*	'it went'
collirru	*sollittu*	*sollíccu*	'it said'

As I have spelt out elsewhere, the generalising/levelling characteristics of this developing interdialect based on the majority non-brahman features (Ramanujan 1968), I shall not dwell on it here. The unsponsored development of an unmarked unspecialised dialect like the Tamil urban

colloquial is one of the most interesting examples of ongoing standardisation, and certainly a means of cohesion among differing castes and sub-regions.

In language at least, 'Sanskritisation', or the taking over by non-brahmans of specifically brahman features has not occurred, except in some lexical items like *saadō*, 'cooked rice', in some dialects. If anything, the younger brahman children are acquiring features of the non-brahman-based standard colloquial. So, the Sender/Receiver relationships which originally had a variety of possible codes are slowly getting overlaid by, if not reduced to, a uniform standard.

NEW TOPICS AND THE COINING OF NEW WORDS

What about *standardisation* in the accustomed sense: the self-conscious, government—or Akademi—sponsored word-making? There is not much reason to believe that much of this self-conscious lexicon has stuck or come into common usage—chiefly because such translationese is used only by translators and textbook writers; and there are no rigid standards enforced or self-imposed. Almost always these vocabularies are required for translation of English technical terms not yet in wide use, e.g., relativity theory, isotope, quantum. But new concepts in wide use like parliament, satellite, bomb, strike, have either Tamil equivalents or Tamil ways of writing the English words. As new topics are introduced into the cultural repertory, new vocabularies are formed either by borrowing or by the normal processes of meaning shift. The examples are many and obvious: station, railway, room, inspector, cricket, from English; *jilla, taluk*, etc., from Persian/Arabic sources. (For a large list, see Meenakshisundaran 1965, chapter 9.)

Have any really striking syntactic innovations occurred as a result of new needs of exposition, as for example, in impersonal journalism or scientific writing? In the absence of serious investigation, one can only be anecdotal. Examining a random page from an article on modern ideas of psychiatry in the excellent Tamil Encyclopedia (vol. 4), I found the style was entirely lucid and impersonal as one would expect from a scientific exposition. Various devices were used to keep the style impersonal; here are a few—(*a*) there were no gender-marked subjects or verbs, the only gender-marked subject was *man*; (*b*) when names like Freud were mentioned they received the honorific plural; (*c*) abstract subjects like 'Freud's theory says . . .', or neuter subjects like 'wishes or desires' abounded; (*d*) impersonal modals that express 'it's possible to . . ., one can . . .' were used, and they require a subject; (*e*) in Tamil there is no syntactic passive, but a word *patu* meaning 'undergo, suffer' may be used to convert statements into passives. One cannot detect in any of these sentences any specifically modern deep *syntactic* devices. The differences were in the use of conjunctions, in length of sentences, punctuation, lexical items. Comparison with a fourteenth-century prose commentary showed that the devices for impersonalisation were very similar. In the absence of even a small-scale diachronic syntax for Tamil, little more can be said.

In modern Tamil newspapers, new kinds of phrases like 'It is reliably learned' or 'in informed circles' are used. English words and names are spelt with adjustments in the script: Tamil does not allow final or initial clusters, but they are written now in words like 'France'. But radical adjustments like the introduction of an entirely new set of letters or diacritics (as some have suggested) to express voiced consonants, which have become quite frequent in names and words like bus, gasoline, Gopal, are still not in vogue, and are hotly resisted as un-Tamil; for the ancient Tamil script is a symbol of regional identity and cultural continuity.

In other Indian languages, technical terms are usually wholesale borrowings from Sanskrit. In Tamil, this is rarely the case. Even from early times technical terms are coined by drawing on archaic words or by making Tamil combinations. High Hindi, high Bengali, high Kannada are usually closer to each other than their 'low' colloquial counterparts because of the frequency of the Sanskritic elements in the high style and in the technical terminology. But high Tamil is less intelligible to a neighbouring-language speaker than 'low' Tamil. In most Indian languages, the technical gobbledygook is Sanskrit; in Tamil, the gobbledygook is ultra-Tamil. This again, I would say, is not a new development. For instance, Tamil grammatical or philosophic terms, the metalanguage of Tamil, have always been Tamil, whereas in neighbouring Kannada the metalanguage is Sanskrit. In most Indian languages the terms for vowel and consonant are *svara* and *vyañjana* (Sanskrit); in Tamil, they are and have always been *uyir* (Ta. 'breath') and *mey* (Ta. 'body').

Two of the big obstacles to the full 'modernisation' or active expansion of Tamil vocabulary, for a full widespread use of scientific and other terms in Tamil, are still (*a*) low rate of literacy, (*b*) the presence of English as a privileged alternative. As long as all the real research in both

humanities and the sciences is done in English by the fully literate Tamil minority, a full range of technical vocabulary is not desperately needed and will not be fully operative. When needed for common use, everyday technical terms in English like 'non-habit forming' in a headache-pill advertisement are now fully explained in Tamil, and not replaced by an equivalent. But as scientific education begins to be conducted up to the highest levels in Tamil, as political education is beginning to be, new ranges of active and passive vocabulary with nuances and distinctions will come into being. Street corner or student-group political discussions are entirely carried on in Tamil, as neither scientific nor even literary discussions are. Meanwhile an excellent large encyclopedia has come into being; text-books in subjects like anthropology and geology and higher mathematics are being written for and used in schools and colleges. Words like *go/stop* on traffic signals, and *push/pull* on doors are in Tamil. But almost none of the neon-advertisements that flash on the sky-scape of Madras are yet (as of 1967) in Tamil—rather, they are in English, indicating different clienteles for the two language events in similar, visual, media.

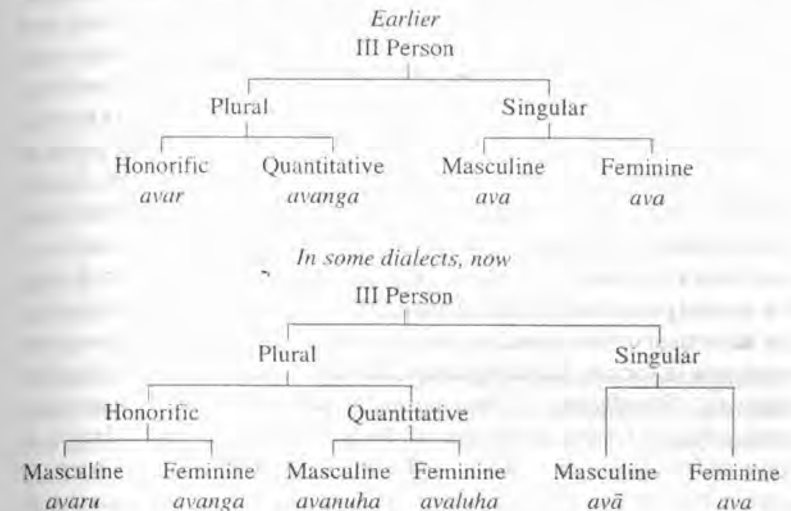
THE CODE

In what ways has *the code* or the structure changed in response to 'modern changes' like democracy, secularisation, etc.? I've already noted the 'merger' of colloquial and literary codes, the new voiceless/voiced distinctions in the phonology of almost all classes, the development structurally of a superposed neutral simplified standard code or dialect, and the higher frequency in scientific or newspaper writing of various existing devices for impersonal expression. I wish to speak of one more structural change which is important as a marker of social change: changes in the pronominal system. Various changes seem to be taking place in pronominal usage, probably in response to social change.

Tamil has an inclusive/exclusive distinction in the first person plural: *namma*, 'we-all', and *naanga*, 'we, not-you'. The distinction seems to be getting blurred. The Ceylon (Sri Lanka) dialects seem to have lost it altogether, and many Indian Tamil informants are beginning to be confused in their responses to this pair.

In the third person, only the singular has a masculine/feminine distinction, the plural doesn't. But many dialects, especially non-brahman ones, have developed masculine and feminine plurals, and more notably masculine and feminine honorifics. *Avar(u)* used to be the common honorific, *avanga* or *avaa*, the plural. Now in several non-brahman dialects

avar(u) is exclusively masculine and *avanga* usually feminine. This systemic change may be displayed thus:



In the second person distinctions of various levels of respect were common in some dialects. Some of the distinctions have become obsolete, others infrequent.

nii	: singular
niinga	: for elders, strangers
niir	: among equals
taangal	: ultra-polite

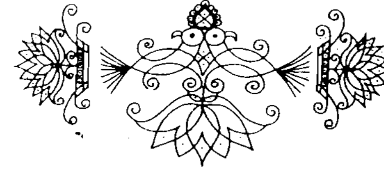
While *taangal* seems to have gone entirely out of colloquial use (unlike in Mysore Kannaḍa *taavu*), *niir* seems to be used only among elderly people in Madras (in Tinnevelly, *niir* is more common than *niinga*), whereas among younger people like college students, office workers, equals seem to use the non-honorific singular *nii*.

In languages like Hindi and Gujarati, the non-honorific pronoun seems to have become reciprocal between husband and wife, while it's still asymmetric even among the most 'modern' Tamil couples, though name-taboos have definitely relaxed. A wife of the older generation would never utter her husband's name, as it decreased his life-expectancy. I am speaking here of only the brahman and the standard colloquial dialects, for there are clearly caste-differences in these aspects of pronominal usage.

VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL

Language activity is only one part of communication in general. 'Modernisation' has meant not only a change from a non-literate to a literate language use, but from auditory to visual media. Language once mixed, and even now mixes, well with various purely or partially auditory arts like the arts of song, drama, mime. But now, in new language events, it is embedded in media like the film, or with pictures as in political cartoons and advertisements which are primarily wholly visual. Sometimes it's in a new complementary or alternating relationship with these other channels. In a minute sample study of 25 Tamil advertisements, I was struck by a large use of two language features both of them having the second person reference; (*i*) imperatives, (*ii*) questions, addressed by the advertiser to the second person (the reader). Some of these questions were new in form to Tamil structure, obviously translated from English: *talaivali*? 'Headache?' (Tamil normally needs a question particle—*talaivaliyaa*?) Nearly seventeen of them used this language device to draw and engage your attention. Of the eight which didn't, two were very old established products, advertising in the same old way for years: Liver Cure and Zambuk. Two were Government Savings ads and seemed averse to using the seductions of commercial ad-men. The other 4 employed many type-fonts, pictures of women and decorative devices, and so could afford to play language down.

Some Thoughts on 'Non-Western' Classics: With Indian Examples



The term *non-Western* is a negative term, a West-centred description of great areas of expression and experience that exist quite independently of anything Western. Furthermore the term lumps together vastly different things as if they were all one undifferentiated mass. It includes China, Japan, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, as well as native American literatures and cultures. And each one of these contains many different periods, regions, genres, etc.

Even the *Western* is not one tradition. Are the books of the Bible Western, or St Augustine who wrote in North Africa? Are Russian novelists and Finnish epics 'Western'? It's all a matter of defining some things in and other things out. Where does the West begin, where does it end? Too far East is West.

Not only are there no Tolstoys among the Zulus (as Saul Bellow is reported to have said, to the dismay of anthropologists and others interested in multiple worlds of culture)—there are no Tolstoys among the British or American tribes either, nor a Shakespeare in Russia.

Geniuses arise out of particular cultures, locales and times, but do not entirely belong to them. Nationalistic ways of classifying cultural expressions like literature or painting, no less than biology or physics, may be convenient, popular, but need to be questioned. When examined, they tend to crumble, requiring endless qualifications.

Labels like *Western, Eastern*, or *non-Western*, are politically loaded. They breed stereotypes and dangerous fictions. No culture is immune to other cultures. No idea, invention, technological device, whether in art, society, or science, is made by a single person or produced by a single sealed-off culture. The printing press, gunpowder, the alphabet, not to

speak of stories or poems or languages themselves—not one of these is the unaided invention or property of a single person or culture—though we often choose to think so. Each is a result of long and continuous interplays, cross-cultural exchanges and transformations.

It is well known that in modern times, India, China, Japan, Africa, and other so-called *non-Western* regions and their cultures have been deeply and irreversibly affected by *Western* languages, cultures, power-plays and economics. We need to recognize that the reverse is also true and will become increasingly true. Conferences, for example, here and across the world, are an effect of such internationalisation and will be a cause for more mingling.

Some examples of these cross-currents and multiple exchanges may be useful. Ezra Pound's poetry is affected by the Chinese and in turn has affected poetry in far-flung places like Japan and India. Picasso has borrowed techniques and effects from African masks, and in turn has given them to painters all over the world. Folktales found in an eleventh-century Sanskrit text, based on local oral traditions, travel to Europe, become part of Boccaccio and other novella-writers, and enter the plays of Shakespeare (e.g., *Cymbeline*). Oppenheimer quotes a verse from the Sanskrit *Gita* when he is awe-struck by the first vision of a nuclear explosion. Thoreau cites Sanskrit texts and feels that the Ganges flows into Walden Pond. Mahatma Gandhi borrows Thoreau's phrase 'civil disobedience' and makes it the basis of his political strategy and philosophy. He is also inspired by the Bible, Tolstoy, and Ruskin. Here in America, Martin Luther King is inspired by Gandhi when he launches his movement for civil rights. Now, Indian protest groups are inspired by King's example, bringing the lines of influence full circle many times over. These great ideas, seminal works, and extraordinary men arise surely out of a place, a time, and a culture which are themselves affected by other places, times, and cultures—and in turn, affect them. No one can keep them home.

As anthropologists like Franz Boas pointed out earlier in the century, race, language and culture are three independent variables. Neither is any of them pure and single in itself, though the labels, black, brown, yellow, or white, Caucasian, Mongolian, or Dravidian are used as if they were pure and single entities. I was born in south India and I'm here in the United States speaking English, listening to and wanting to understand Chinese poetry, African epics, and Caribbean novels. I've students born in Japan, Iowa, or Czechoslovakia who learn Tamil or Sanskrit, become experts in Zuni rituals or Javanese music. Who is to keep us from breaking out of labels like Indian, Black, WASP, wog or Korean?

We must look at the classics of different cultures in the light of such thoughts. A literary classic does express a whole community over a long time, forms its values and enacts its conflicts in a language of its own. Yet it transcends that community and belongs to anyone who wishes to work towards understanding and experiencing it. To question the possibility of such understanding, admittedly difficult, partial, and requiring effort, is to question the human enterprise and condemn ourselves to self-regarding prisons of solipsism. We need to attend carefully both to the uniqueness of cultural expression as well as to the universal elements in it, both to its specificity and its accessibility, both to its otherness and its challenge to our ability to share it.

To understand the classic of another culture or time is not easy nor automatic, for it is embedded in that culture, reworks its symbols and genres, draws sustenance from its unspoken values and beliefs. To understand such a classic or to translate it, as I've said elsewhere, is to be ambitious like the Mongolian conqueror who wanted a songbird in a foreign country. Soon he discovered that he couldn't have the bird without the nest, nor the nest without the branch it's sitting on, nor the branch without the tree, nor the tree without 'its multitude of roots, its ball of earth and its border of soil, a remnant of home territory evoking a field, a province, a country, and an empire . . .,' as St-John Perse says in his poem *The Birds* (1966).

II

In the latter half of this short paper, I'd like to present a short anthology of Indian poems from several languages. Before I do that, a little background about the languages and the traditions may be useful.

The 1971 Census of India reported some 3,000 speech varieties or dialects, noting the names that the speakers themselves gave to their speech. Then the linguists set to work on it and classified these speech-varieties into about 105 or 107 (depending on certain technical considerations) languages. These languages were distributed among four language families (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic). Over the centuries, about twenty-five of these languages have had written literatures (in ten different scripts). Some of these have very long histories. The Vedic hymns in Sanskrit were composed probably around 1500 BC. The earliest Tamil poetry is at least two thousand years old.

Every one of the 3,000 or so dialects has oral traditions, most of them never recorded. For instance, when we speak of epics, we think only of written epics, the *Iliad* in Greece, the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India or Southeast Asia, or later Virgil's *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The primary

epics like the *Iliad* or the *Rāmāyaṇa* were themselves based on oral traditions. Furthermore, in countries like India, classics like the *Mahābhārata* or the *Rāmāyaṇa* have multiple existences. They exist not only in one language or place but in many regions, languages and versions, in oral and written media, in 'classical' and 'folk' modes, in ancient and current renditions—breaking many of the usual Western dichotomies. Unlike the Western classics like the *Iliad*, they are known today to large populations, to men and women, children and adults, the literate and the illiterate. Such classics, however ancient, are also in daily contemporary consciousness, in proverbs, common phrases, songs, movies, magazines, and more recently on TV. In Europe, only the Bible in its hundreds of translations and myriad uses is comparable to these classics.

Furthermore, there are scores of oral epics, never written down, in places like India and Africa. In just one language-region (Karnataka) in south India, one may count eighteen different epic narratives that bards recite. These facts change our conception of 'the epic' itself.

III

Let me give a small number of examples and I shall try to order them around a Hindu creation myth. Creation myths contain central themes explored by later literatures. For instance, the first chapters of Genesis in the Bible contain in themselves inspirations for Dante, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, poems like Marvell's 'Thoughts in a Garden', Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter', and the search for paradise in the original conception of America—not to speak of numberless paintings, sculptures, or items of folklore like proverbs, songs and jokes, or even popular literature like science fiction.

One ancient Hindu creation myth (there are many) tells the following story:

In the beginning, this universe was Soul in the form of a Person (Purusha). He looked around and saw nothing other than himself. He said, 'I am,' and thus the word 'I' was born. . . . He was afraid. . . . He reflected, 'What am I afraid of? There's nothing other than me.' Then his fear vanished. For one becomes afraid of a second. Yet he did not rejoice. . . . He desired a second. He was of the same size and kind as a man and a woman closely embracing. He caused himself to fall (*pat*) into two pieces and from him a husband and a wife were born. The male united with the female, and from this act mankind was born.

Then she thought, 'How can he unite with me after engendering me? For shame! I'll conceal myself.' She became a cow; he became a bull and united with her, and from this all the cattle were born. She became a mare and he a stallion. She became a female ass, he a male ass and united with her and from this all whole-hooved animals were born. She became a she-goat and he became a billy-goat. She became a ewe and he a ram, and united with her, and from this goats and sheep were born. Thus the Person created all the pairs, down to the ants. (Adapted from O'Flaherty 1975)

Compare this with the Judeo-Christian myth that we all know from the Bible. Without going into controversies of interpretation that have raged over continents and centuries, some things seem to be clear in the Hindu myth. The creator god does not make or create man and woman. He splits off, like a cell, and himself becomes male and female. Then the two transform themselves into male and female animals, from cattle to ants.

Thus God, man, woman and animals are made of the same stuff, they are part of one continuous series of transformations, the differentiation of one into many. Indeed here the 'Fall' is the division of the One into the Many. And later Hindu religious practice has the goal of returning from the Many to the One—the word *yoga* comes from the same root as the English 'yoke', suggesting that the goal of yogic practice is the yoking of the separate soul to the One. Furthermore, creation is not a making but 'a pouring forth', which is the root meaning for the Sanskrit word for creation, *sṛṣṭi*.

Such a myth expresses a worldview that insists on continuities, on transformations. So one could begin anywhere and make poetry and religion out of it. Here is an ancient Sanskrit poem on food.

FOOD CHAIN, SANSKRIT STYLE

From food, from food,
creatures, all creatures
come to be.

Gorging, disgorging,
beings come
to be.

By food they live,
in food they move,
into food they pass.

food, the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be,

elixir,
herb of herbs
for mortals.

Food, food, Brahman is food:

only they eat
who know
they eat their god.

For food is the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be:

elixir,
herb of herbs
for mortals.

From food all beings
come to be,
by food

they grow,
into food
they pass.

And what eats is eaten,
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.

After the Sanskrit, *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, vallī 2, anuvāka 2;
translated by A.K. Ramanujan

The poem describes what biologists would call a 'food chain' and anchors the centrality of food in the living world, and calls upon us to recognise it as a god who circulates through us and the universe of living and non-living beings. God himself is both within and without all things in the following ninth-century Tamil poem

THE PARADIGM

We here and that man, this man,
and that other in-between,
and that woman, this woman,
and that other, whoever,

those people, and these,
and these others in-between,
this thing, that thing,
and this other in-between, whichever,

all things dying, these things,
those things, those others in-between,
good things, bad things,
things that were, that will be,

being all of them,
he stands there.

Nammāḻvār, 1.1.4 (Ramanujan 1981, 3)

The creation myth cited earlier also makes it clear that male and female are made of the same divine substance, different only in bodily form. Contrary to Freud's dictum that has rightly infuriated many feminists that 'anatomy is dēstiny', the following tenth-century Kannada poem asserts the opposite. I've often thought it's a poem that many modern feminists could take as their motto:

MALE AND FEMALE

If they see
breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,

if beard and whiskers
they call it man:

but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman

O Rāmanātha

Devara Dāsimayya, 133 (Ramanujan 1973, 110)

In this metonymic universe, where nature and man are related to one another for they are made of the same stuff, where one may represent the other because they are akin and 'consubsubstantial', landscapes give poetry a language within a language. Without going into the complex and fascinating details of this poetics, I'll give just one example from Tamil (*circa* 1st–3rd centuries). Here the mood of the speaker is evoked through the landscape in which she and her lover have made love. Her fears are expressed through the image of the heron, a bird of prey, an inhabitant of that habitat, that has eyes only for the fish in the running water. The running water itself is like time flowing by.

WHAT SHE SAID

Only the thief was there, no one else.
And if he should lie, what can I do?

There was only
  a thin-legged heron standing
on legs yellow as millet stems
and looking
  for lampreys
in the running water
  when he took me.

Kapilar, *Kuruntokai*, 25 (Ramanujan 1985, 17)

In the creation myth, sexual desire is at the origin of the universe. In the Judeo-Christian myth, sexual desire is a temptation; to indulge in it is a sin against God, a breaking of the covenant, punished by the loss of paradise. There too, ironically, the transgression is the beginning of worldly history. (Charles Lamb somewhere perversely rejoices at the Fall that started all of human civilisation.) In the Hindu myth, the god splits himself into male and female. Compare it with the androgynous figure in Plato's *Symposium*, halved into male and female segments which forever seek each other and crave union. An ancient Hindu sage said, 'One self is like half a fragment.' Following this line of metaphoric thought, later religious poets think of the relation of the human soul to god as the relation of a lover and his beloved. They enlist into their religious poetry all the moods of love, all the phases of physical desire, the movements of separation and union. In Kṛṣṇa mythology, Kṛṣṇa the divine lover and Rādhā his human beloved cavort in a village full of women who are all in love with him. Many subtle and passionate love poems are addressed to god in this tradition and explore through that repertoire of erotic images the relations of god and the human soul. Among the numberless examples that could be drawn from many Indian languages, I shall choose only one from Bengal (fifteenth century). Note how the images get more and more inward and intimate.

RĀDHĀ TO KṚṢṆA

As the mirror to my hand,
the flowers to my hair,
kohl to my eyes,
tāmbul to my mouth,
musk to my breast,
necklace to my throat,

ecstasy to my flesh,
heart to my home—

as wing to bird,
water to fish,
life to the living—
so you to me.
But tell me,
Mādhava, beloved,
who are you?
Who are you really?

Vidyāpati says, they are one another.

(Dimock and Levertov 1967, 15)

Instead of giving a random selection of poems, I chose to give you a small sample of poems around interrelated themes in a small number of languages over the centuries. I could have added more languages, themes, genres, and chosen from any of the fifteen modern literary languages, including English. But my concern is only to suggest the riches available in Indian traditions, and to point to the very different viewpoints towards familiar themes like god and creation, male and female, eroticism and religion. I would like to close this all-too-brief a piece with a twelfth-century Sanskrit poem about what a poet should know—almost a recipe for world literature.

WHAT A POET SHOULD KNOW

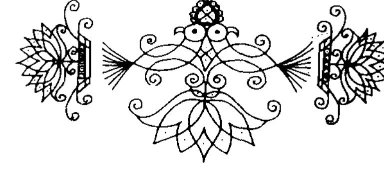
A poet should learn with his eyes
the forms of leaves
he should know how to make
people laugh when they are together
he should get to see
what they are really like
he should know about oceans and mountains
in themselves
and the sun and the moon and the stars
his mind should enter into the seasons
he should go
among many people
in many places
and learn their languages.

Kṣemendra, *Kavikaṇṭhābharaṇa*, verses 10–11
(Merwin and Masson 1977)

II

Essays on Classical Literatures

Introduction by Vinay Dharwadker



Ramanujan's essays on classical subjects deal broadly with three classes of material: the two epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, in their Sanskrit as well as later and other forms; high-classical Sanskrit drama and late-classical Sanskrit poetics; and classical Tamil poetry in all its aspects, from its grammar and poetics to its ethics and long-term historical effects. This section of the book contains two essays in the first area, one each on the two epics; and four essays in the third area, including an essay on the process of translating a classical Tamil poem into modern English. Ramanujan's scholarly and critical contributions to the second area (classical Sanskrit drama and poetics) are already available or are forthcoming in book form: his remarkable piece on Kalidasa, 'Sakuntala and the Ring of Remembrance', completed as a lecture-text in the summer of 1993, a few weeks before his death, will be included in his *Uncollected Poetry and Prose* (1997); whereas his lucid explications of *rasa, dhvani*, and *vakrokti*, among other topics, are part of the chapter on 'Indian Poetics' in *The Literatures of India: An Introduction* (1974) by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., and others.

Among the essays reproduced here, 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*' explores the enormous variation in the tellings and retellings of the story of Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, and Rāvaṇa across southern and southeastern Asia and elsewhere over the past two and a half millennia. This exploration questions and overturns the persistent Orientalist assumption that a poetic 'work' like the *Rāmāyaṇa* has an *Ur*-text or a fixed, normative original form, to be found in the Sanskrit telling traditionally attributed to Vālmīki, of which all subsequent tellings are merely 'variants' of varying degrees of fidelity, authority, and reliability. Ramanujan's essay demonstrates wittily and memorably that the numerous tellings of

rāmakathā (the story of Rāma) are all textual performances to an equal extent (though not necessarily of equal poetic or cultural value); which make it virtually impossible to isolate a single narrative core that remains stable throughout the process of dissemination. The differences of story (*sujet*) and discourse (*récit*) among all these tellings are central to what the *Rāmāyaṇa* has actually sparked off in the many cultures it has penetrated, whether in the form of Vālmīki's Sanskrit epic and Kampaṉ's Tamil one, or of the Jain *Paumacariyā* and the Thai *Ramakien*. In this diversity, the epic poem no longer remains a definite 'work' but becomes, instead, a whole genre or tradition, 'a series of translations clustering around one or another in a family of texts,' in which 'no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text.'

'Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*' then takes up a complementary question. If an Indian epic tends to be a loose-leaf compilation of episodes, characters, and situations, or a series of translations of 'bits and pieces' that enlarges a work till it seems like an entire tradition in itself, then how does the *Mahābhārata* become the distinctive, well-formed poetic work that it also seems to be? Here Ramanujan argues, again against the dominant Orientalist view, that the *Mahābhārata* acquires a definite structure by employing the principle of repetition. The process of repetition that is crucial to the generation of the structure, however, is not just the recurrence of the same static elements. Rather, it is a process by which various elements (from individual images and characters to entire situations and stories) reappear in intricate mutual relations and sequences, and at multiple levels of signification and meaning, with crucial discursive variations or differences. The result is that an apparent 'tradition' like the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* turns out to possess a determinate set of organisational principles, despite its seeming lack of coherence, and not unlike the principle of growth in a crystal that 'could not have grown at all without having imperfections.' The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, in fact, participate in two contrary textual movements: a centrifugal one towards dispersal, through radical differentiation, away from a fixed narrative and discursive core; and a centripetal one towards accretion, through cumulative repetition, around a singular structural centre.

The four essays on classical Tamil poetry that follow complicate this two-sided picture of ancient Indian literary practice by transporting us into a world that is not Sanskrit or epic in origin or reference. 'Classics Lost and Found', for instance, recounts the dramatic story of how, ironically, the Tamil people discovered and recovered their own classical poetics and poetry, late in the nineteenth century, through the traditions of preservation, learning, and transmission maintained by the Jains, outside the circles of Hindu culture and brahmanical scholarship. This essay also emphasizes the remarkable relevance of T.S. Eliot's theory of tradition and innovation to Indian literature, where traditions are not simply inherited but have to be acquired with much labour; where 'the past' is characterised not only by its 'pastness' but also its 'presence'; where, moreover, the 'past works through the present as the present reworks the past'; and where, especially, 'Indian tradition is not a single street or a one-way street but consists of many connected streets and neighbourhoods,' so that we have 'not . . . one past but many pasts' intersecting with the present simultaneously.

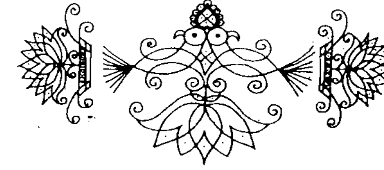
'Form in Classical Tamil Poetry' exemplifies this last principle by articulating in detail one of the pasts of Indian literature which, until Ramanujan translated it, remained subordinated to a hegemonic, pan-Indian Sanskrit past. As an early version of what was to become famous as the Afterword to Ramanujan's *Poems of Love and War* (1985), this essay implicitly yet forcefully demonstrates the alterity and autonomy of classical Tamil poetic theory and practice in relation to Sanskrit poetics and poetry. In the process, it also breaks down the crude separation between form and content imposed on the study of Indian texts by Indological scholarship, revealing the complex interconnections among linguistic categories, poetic conventions, social institutions, and ethical codes in the Tamil case, and hence showing how what readers usually call 'content' is really 'form' to the ancient poets.

'Translating a Tamil Poem' then displays the multiplicity of histories and cultures on the subcontinent to a fuller extent by examining the peculiar combination of possibilities, opportunities and impossibilities implicated in the act of translating a lyric poem from classical Tamil, which is at least two thousand years old, into contemporary English. Working from yet another angle of vision here, Ramanujan shows how texts, even short and apparently simple ones, are organised intricately at several levels at once, are always woven into networks of other texts, and are embedded inextricably in larger social and historical contexts. He also reminds us that we can constructively bridge the gaps between two times, places, languages, and cultures with the 'necessary fictions' of universals; with the notion that poems interiorise the culture in which they are produced; with a belief in the systematicity of language and

poetry; with the practice of translation as a process of structural rather than verbal mimicry; and, ultimately, with a leap of the poetic imagination.

Finally, 'From Classicism to *Bhakti*', an essay that Ramanujan co-authored with Norman Cutler, takes up the issue of how classical Tamil poetry and culture, emerging on the periphery of the epic and classical worlds of Sanskrit in north India, historically shape the subsequent poetry and culture of *bhakti*, as the latter appears in the works of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *ālvārs*, especially Nammālvār. Taken together with the essays on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, and the other three essays on classical Tamil culture included here, this essay indicates why, even in the first millennium of the common era, there can be no simple formula for 'unity' or 'diversity'—or for 'unity in diversity'—in the Indian subcontinent.

Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation



How many *Rāmāyaṇas*? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some *Rāmāyaṇas*, a question is sometimes asked: How many *Rāmāyaṇas* have there been? And there are stories that answer the question. Here is one.

One day when Rāma was sitting on his throne, his ring fell off. When it touched the earth, it made a hole in the ground and disappeared into it. It was gone. His trusty henchman, Hanumān, was at his feet. Rāma said to Hanumān, 'Look, my ring is lost. Find it for me.'

Now Hanumān can enter any hole, no matter how tiny. He had the power to become the smallest of the small and larger than the largest thing. So he took on a tiny form and went down the hole.

He went and went and went and suddenly fell into the netherworld. There were women down there. 'Look, a tiny monkey! It's fallen from above!' Then they caught him and placed him on a platter (*thāli*). The King of Spirits (*bhūt*), who lives in the netherworld, likes to eat animals. So Hanumān was sent to him as part of his dinner, along with his vegetables. Hanumān sat on the platter, wondering what to do.

While this was going on in the netherworld, Rāma sat on his throne on the earth above. The sage Vasiṣtha and the god Brahmā came to see him. They said to Rāma, 'We want to talk privately with you. We don't want anyone to hear what we say or interrupt it. Do we agree?'

'All right,' said Rāma, 'we'll talk.'

Then they said, 'Lay down a rule. If anyone comes in as we are talking, his head should be cut off.'

'It will be done,' said Rāma.

Who would be the most trustworthy person to guard the door? Hanumān had gone down to fetch the ring. Rāma trusted no one more than Lakṣmaṇa, so he asked Lakṣmaṇa to stand by the door. 'Don't allow anyone to enter,' he ordered.

Lakṣmaṇa was standing at the door when the sage Viśvāmitra appeared and said, 'I need to see Rāma at once. It's urgent. Tell me, where is Rāma?'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'Don't go in now. He is talking to some people. It's important.'

'What is there that Rāma would hide from me?' said Viśvāmitra. 'I must go in, right now.'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'I'll have to ask his permission before I can let you in.'

'Go in and ask then.'

'I can't go in till Rāma comes out. You'll have to wait.'

'If you don't go in and announce my presence, I'll burn the entire kingdom of Ayodhya with a curse,' said Viśvāmitra.

Lakṣmaṇa thought, 'If I go in now, I'll die. But if I don't go, this hotheaded man will burn down the kingdom. All the subjects, all things living in it, will die. It's better that I alone should die.'

So he went right in.

Rāma asked him, 'What's the matter?'

'Viśvāmitra is here.'

'Send him in.'

So Viśvāmitra went in. The private talk had already come to an end. Brahmā and Vasiṣtha had come to see Rāma and say to him, 'Your work in the world of human beings is over. Your incarnation as Rāma must now be given up. Leave this body, come up, and rejoin the gods.' That's all they wanted to say.

Lakṣmaṇa said to Rāma, 'Brother, you should cut off my head.'

Rāma said, 'Why? We had nothing more to say. Nothing was left. So why should I cut off your head?'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'You can't do that. You can't let me off because I'm your brother. There'll be a blot on Rāma's name. You didn't spare your wife. You sent her to the jungle. I must be punished. I will leave.'

Lakṣmaṇa was an avatar of Śeṣa, the serpent on whom Viṣṇu sleeps. His time was up too. He went directly to the river Sarayū and disappeared in the flowing waters.

When Lakṣmaṇa relinquished his body, Rāma summoned all his followers, Vibhīṣaṇa, Sugrīva, and others, and arranged for the coronation of his twin sons, Lava and Kuśa. Then Rāma too entered the river Sarayū.

All this while, Hanumān was in the netherworld. When he was finally taken to the King of Spirits, he kept repeating the name of Rāma. 'Rāma Rāma Rāma . . .'

Then the King of Spirits asked, 'Who are you?'

'Hanumān.'

'Hanumān? Why have you come here?'

'Rāma's ring fell into a hole. I've come to fetch it.'

The king looked around and showed him a platter. On it were thousands of rings. They were all Rāma's rings. The king brought the platter to Hanumān, set it down, and said, 'Pick out your Rāma's ring and take it.'

They were all exactly the same. 'I don't know which one it is,' said Hanumān, shaking his head.

The King of Spirits said, 'There have been as many Rāmas as there are rings on this platter. When you return to earth, you will not find Rāma. This incarnation of Rāma is now over. Whenever an incarnation of Rāma is about to be over, his ring falls down. I collect them and keep them. Now you can go.'

So Hanumān left.[1]

This story is usually told to suggest that for every such Rāma there is a *Rāmāyaṇa*. The number of *Rāmāyaṇas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Just a list of languages in which the Rāma story is found makes one gasp: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan—to say nothing of Western languages. Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rāma story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kāvyas* or ornate poetic compositions, *purāṇas* or old mythological stories, and so forth). If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of *Rāmāyaṇas* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays

and shadows plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures.[2] Camille Bulcke (1950), a student of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, counted three hundred tellings.[3] It's no wonder that even as long ago as the fourteenth century, Kumāravyāsa, a Kannada poet, chose to write a *Mahābhārata*, because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of *Rāmāyaṇa* poets (*tiṇikidanu phaṇirāya rāmāyaṇada kavigaḷa bhāradali*). In this paper, indebted for its data to numerous previous translators and scholars, I would like to sort out for myself, and I hope for others, how these hundreds of tellings of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other: what gets translated, transplanted, transposed.

VĀLMĪKI AND KAMPAṈ: TWO AHALYĀS

Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the world *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur*-text—usually Vālmīki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But as we shall see, it is not always Vālmīki's narrative that is carried from one language to another.

It would be useful to make some distinctions before we begin. The tradition itself distinguishes between the Rāma story (*rāmakathā*) and texts composed by a specific person—Vālmīki, Kampaṉ, or Kṛttivāsa, for example. Though many of the latter are popularly called *Rāmāyaṇas* (like *Kamparāmāyaṇam*), few texts actually bear the title *Rāmāyaṇa*; they are given titles like *Irāmāvatāram* (The Incarnation of Rāma), *Rāmcaritmānas* (The Lake of the Acts of Rāma), *Ramakien* (The Story of Rāma) and so on. Their relations to the Rāma story as told by Vālmīki also vary. This traditional distinction between *kathā* (story) and *kāvya* (poem) parallels the French one between *sujet* and *récit*, or the English one between story and discourse (Chatman 1978). It is also analogous to the distinction between a sentence and a speech act. The story may be the same in two tellings, but the discourse may be vastly different. Even the structure and sequence of events may be the same, but the style, details, tone, and texture—and therefore the import—may be vastly different.

Here are two tellings of the 'same' episode, which occur at the same point in the sequence of the narrative. The first is from the first book (*Bālakāṇḍa*) of Vālmīki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*; the second from the first canto (*Pālakāṇṭam*) of Kampaṉ's *Irāmāvatāram* in Tamil. Both narrate the story of Ahalyā.

THE AHALYĀ EPISODE: VĀLMĪKI

Seeing Mithilā, Janaka's white
  and dazzling city, all the sages
cried out in praise, 'Wonderful!
  How wonderful!'

Rāghava, sighting on the outskirts
  of Mithilā an ashram, ancient,
unpeopled, and lovely, asked the sage,
  'What is this holy place,

so like an ashram but without a hermit?
  Master, I'd like to hear: whose was it?'
Hearing Rāghava's words, the great sage
  Viśvāmitra, man of fire,

expert in words answered, 'Listen,
  Rāghava, I'll tell you whose ashram
this was and how it was cursed
  by a great man in anger.

It was great Gautama's, this ashram
  that reminds you of heaven, worshipped
even by the gods. Long ago, with Ahalyā
  he practised *tapas*[4] here

for countless years. Once, knowing that Gautama
  was away, Indra (called Thousand Eyes),
Śacī's husband, took on the likeness
  of the sage, and said to Ahalyā:

"Men pursuing their desire do not wait
  for the proper season, O you who
have a perfect body. Making love
  with you: that's what I want.
That waist of yours is lovely."

She knew it was Indra of the Thousand Eyes
  in the guise of the sage. Yet she,
wrongheaded woman, made up her mind,
  excited, curious about the king
of the gods.

And then, her inner being satisfied,
  she said to the god, "I'm satisfied, king
of the gods. Go quickly from here.
  O giver of honour, lover, protect
yourself and me."

And Indra smiled and said to Ahalyā,
"Woman of lovely hips, I am
very content. I'll go the way I came."
Thus after making love, he came out
of the hut made of leaves.

And, O Rāma, as he hurried away,
nervous about Gautama and flustered,
he caught sight of Gautama coming in,
the great sage, unassailable
by gods and antigods,

empowered by his *tapas*, still wet
with the water of the river
he'd bathed in, blazing like fire,
with *kuśa* grass and kindling
in his hands.

Seeing him, the king of the gods was
terror-struck, his face drained of colour.
The sage, facing Thousand Eyes now dressed
as the sage, the one rich in virtue
and the other with none,

spoke to him in anger: "You took my form,
you fool, and did this that should never
be done. Therefore you will lose your testicles."
At once, they fell to the ground, they fell
even as the great sage spoke

his words in anger to Thousand Eyes.
Having cursed Indra, he then cursed
Ahalyā: "You, you will dwell here
many thousands of years, eating the air,
without food, rolling in ash,

and burning invisible to all creatures.
When Rāma, unassailable son
of Daśaratha, comes to this terrible
wilderness, you will become pure,
you woman of no virtue,

you will be cleansed of lust and confusion.
Filled then with joy, you'll wear again
your form in my presence." And saying
this to that woman of bad conduct,
blazing Gautama abandoned

the ashram, and did his *tapas*
on a beautiful Himalayan peak,
haunt of celestial singers and
perfected beings.

Emasculated Indra then
spoke to the gods led by Agni
attended by the sages
and the celestial singers.

"I've only done this work on behalf
of the gods, putting great Gautama
in a rage, blocking his *tapas*.
He has emasculated me

and rejected her in anger.
Through this great outburst
of curses, I've robbed him
of his *tapas*. Therefore,

great gods, sages, and celestial singers,
help me, helper of the gods,
to regain my testicles." And the gods,
led by Agni, listened to Indra

of the Hundred Sacrifices and went
with the Marut hosts
to the divine ancestors, and said,
"Some time ago, Indra, infatuated,

ravished the sage's wife
and was then emasculated
by the sage's curse. Indra,
king of gods, destroyer of cities,

is now angry with the gods.
This ram has testicles
but great Indra has lost his.
So take the ram's testicles

and quickly graft them onto Indra.
A castrated ram will give you
supreme satisfaction and will be
a source of pleasure.

People who offer it
will have endless fruit.
You will give them your plenty."
Having heard Agni's words,

the Ancestors got together
    and ripped off the ram's testicles
and applied them then to Indra
    of the Thousand Eyes.

Since then, the divine Ancestors
    eat these castrated rams
and Indra has the testicles
    of the beast through the power
of great Gautama's *tapas*.

Come then, Rāma, to the ashram
    of the holy sage and save Ahalyā
who has the beauty of a goddess.'
    Rāghava heard Viśvāmitra's words

and followed him into the ashram
    with Lakṣmaṇa: there he saw
Ahalyā, shining with an inner light
    earned through her penances,

blazing yet hidden from the eyes
    of passersby, even gods and antigods.

(Sastrigal and Sastri 1958, *kāṇda* 1, *sargas* 47–8;
translated by David Shulman and A.K. Ramanujan)

THE AHALYĀ EPISODE: KAMPAN̲

They came to many-towered Mithilā
and stood outside the fortress.
On the towers were many flags.

There, high on an open field,
stood a black rock
that was once Ahalyā,

the great sage's wife who fell
because she lost her chastity,
the mark of marriage in a house. [Verse 547]

Rāma's eyes fell on the rock,
the dust of his feet
wafted on it.

Like one unconscious
coming to,
cutting through ignorance,

changing his dark carcass
for true form
as he reaches the Lord's feet,

so did she stand alive
formed and coloured
again as she once was. [548]

Rāma then asks Viśvāmitra why this lovely woman had been turned to stone. Viśvāmitra replies:

'Listen. Once Indra,
Lord of the Diamond Axe,
waited on the absence

of Gautama, a sage all spirit,

meaning to reach out
for the lovely breast
of doe-eyed Ahalyā, his wife. [551]

Hurt by love's arrows,
hurt by the look in her eyes
that pierced him like a spear, Indra
writhed and cast about
for stratagems;

one day, overwhelmed
and mindless, he isolated
the sage; and sneaked
into the hermitage
wearing the exact body of Gautama

whose heart knew no falsehoods. [552]

Sneaking in, he joined Ahalyā;
coupled, they drank deep
of the clear new wine
of first-night weddings;

and she knew.

                Yet unable
to put aside what was not hers,
she dallied in her joy,
but the sage did not tarry,
he came back, a very Śiva
with three eyes in his head. [553]

Gautama, who used no arrows
from bows, could use more inescapable
powers of curse and blessing.

When he arrived, Ahalyā stood there,
stunned, bearing the shame of a deed
that will not end in this endless world.

Indra shook in terror,
started to move away
in the likeness of a cat. [554]

Eyes dropping fire, Gautama
saw what was done,
and his words flew
like the burning arrows
at your hand:

"May you be covered
by the vaginas
of a thousand women!"
In the twinkle of an eye
they came and covered him. [555]

Covered with shame,
laughingstock of the world,
Indra left.

The sage turned
to his tender wife
and cursed:

"O bought woman!
May you turn to stone!"
and she fell at once

a rough thing
of black rock. [556]

Yet as she fell she begged:
"To bear and forgive wrongs
is also the way of elders.
O Śiva-like lord of mine,
set some limit to your curse!"

So he said: "Rāma
will come, wearing garlands that bring
the hum of bees with them.
When the dust of his feet falls on you,
you will be released from the body of stone." [557]

The immortals looked at their king
and came down at once to Gautama
in a delegation led by Brahmā
and begged of Gautama to relent.

Gautama's mind had changed
and cooled. He changed
the marks on Indra to a thousand eyes
and the gods went back to their worlds,
while she lay there, a thing of stone. [558]

That was the way it was.
From now on, no more misery,
only release, for all things
in this world.

O cloud-dark lord

who battled with that ogress,
black as soot, I saw there
the virtue of your hands
and here the virtue of your feet.' [559][5]

Let me rapidly suggest a few differences between the two tellings. In Vālmīki, Indra seduces a willing Ahalyā. In Kampan̲, Ahalyā realises she is doing wrong but cannot let go of the forbidden joy; the poem has also suggested earlier that her sage-husband is all spirit, details which together add a certain psychological subtlety to the seduction. Indra tries to steal away in the shape of a cat, clearly a folklore motif (also found, for example, in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, an eleventh-century Sanskrit compendium of folktales; see Tawney 1927). He is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed into eyes, and Ahalyā is changed into frigid stone. The poetic justice wreaked on both offenders is fitted to their wrongdoing. Indra bears the mark of what he lusted for, while Ahalyā is rendered incapable of responding to anything. These motifs, not found in Vālmīki, are attested in South Indian folklore and other southern Rāma stories, inscriptions and earlier Tamil poems, as well as in non-Tamil sources. Kampan̲, here and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Vālmīki's materials but folds in many regional folk traditions. It is often through him that they then become part of other *Rāmāyaṇas*.

In technique, Kampan̲ is also more dramatic than Vālmīki. Rāma's feet transmute the black stone into Ahalyā first; only afterwards is her story told. The black stone standing on a high place, waiting for

Rāma, is itself a very effective, vivid symbol. Ahalyā's revival, her waking from cold stone to fleshly human warmth, becomes an occasion for a moving *bhakti* (devotional) meditation on the soul waking to its form in god.

Finally, the Ahalyā episode is related to previous episodes in the poem such as that in which Rāma destroys the demoness Tāṭakā. There he was the destroyer of evil, the bringer of sterility and the ashes of death to his enemies. Here, as the reviver of Ahalyā, he is a cloud-dark god of fertility. Throughout Kampaṉ's poem, Rāma is a Tamil hero, a generous giver and a ruthless destroyer of foes. And the *bhakti* vision makes the release of Ahalyā from her rock-bound sin a paradigm of Rāma's incarnatory mission to release all souls from world-bound misery.

In Vālmīki, Rāma's character is not that of a god but of a god-man who has to live within the limits of a human form with all its vicissitudes. Some argue that the references to Rāma's divinity and his incarnation for the purpose of destroying Rāvaṇa, and the first and last books of the epic, in which Rāma is clearly described as a god with such a mission, are later additions.[6] Be that as it may, in Kampaṉ he is clearly a god. Hence a passage like the above is dense with religious feeling and theological images. Kampaṉ, writing in the twelfth century, composed his poem under the influence of Tamil *bhakti*. He had for his master Nammāḻvār (ninth century?), the most eminent of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava saints. So, for Kampaṉ, Rāma is a god who is on a mission to root out evil, sustain the good and bring release to all living beings. The encounter with Ahalyā is only the first in a series, ending with Rāma's encounter with Rāvaṇa the demon himself. For Nammāḻvār, Rāma is a saviour of *all* beings, from the lowly grass to the great gods:

BY RĀMA'S GRACE

Why would anyone want
    to learn anything but Rāma?

Beginning with the low grass
    and the creeping ant
with nothing
    whatever,

he took everything in his city,
    everything moving,
    everything still,

he took everything,
    everything born
of the lord
    of four faces,

he took them all
    to the very best of states.

Nammāḻvār 7.5.1 (Ramanujan 1981, 47)

Kampaṉ's epic poem enacts in detail and with passion Nammāḻvār's vision of Rāma.

Thus the Ahalyā episode is essentially the same, but the weave, the texture, the colours are very different. Part of the aesthetic pleasure in the later poet's telling derives from its artistic use of its predecessor's work, from ringing changes on it. To some extent all later *Rāmāyaṇas* play on the knowledge of previous tellings: they are meta-*Rāmāyaṇas*. I cannot resist repeating my favourite example. In several of the later *Rāmāyaṇas* (such as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, sixteenth century), when Rāma is exiled, he does not want Sītā to go with him into the forest. Sītā argues with him. At first she uses the usual arguments: she is his wife, she should share his sufferings, exile herself in his exile and so on. When he still resists the idea, she is furious. She bursts out, 'Countless *Rāmāyaṇas* have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sītā doesn't go with Rāma to the forest?' That clinches the argument, and she goes with him (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 2.4.77–8; see Nath 1913, 39). And as nothing in India occurs uniquely, even this motif appears in more than one *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Now the Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampaṉ generates its own offspring, its own special sphere of influence. Read in Telugu characters in Telugu country, played as drama in the Malayalam area as part of temple ritual, it is also an important link in the transmission of the Rāma story to Southeast Asia. It has been convincingly shown that the eighteenth-century Thai *Ramakien* owes much to the Tamil epic. For instance, the names of many characters in the Thai work are not Sanskrit names, but clearly Tamil names (for example, Ṛśyaśṛṅga in Sanskrit but Kalaikkōṭu in Tamil, the latter borrowed into Thai). Tulsī's Hindi *Rāmcaritmānas* and the Malaysian *Hikayat Seri Ram* too owe many details to the Kampaṉ poem (Singaravelu 1968).

Thus obviously transplantations take place through several routes. In some languages the word for tea is derived from a northern Chinese dialect and in others from a southern dialect; thus some languages, like

English and French, have some form of the word *tea*, while others, like Hindi and Russian, have some form of the word *chā(y)*. Similarly, the Rāma story seems to have travelled along three routes, according to Santosh Desai: 'By land, the northern route took the story from the Punjab and Kashmir into China, Tibet, and East Turkestan; by sea, the southern route carried the story from Gujarat and South India into Java, Sumatra, and Malaya; and again by land, the eastern route delivered the story from Bengal into Burma, Thailand, and Laos. Vietnam and Cambodia obtained their stories partly from Java and partly from India via the eastern route' (Desai 1970, 5).

JAIN TELLINGS

When we enter the world of Jain tellings, the Rāma story no longer carries Hindu values. Indeed the Jain texts express the feeling that the Hindus, especially the brahmans, have maligned Rāvaṇa, made him into a villain. Here is a set of questions that a Jain text begins by asking: 'How can monkeys vanquish the powerful *rākṣasa* warriors like Rāvaṇa? How can noble men and Jain worthies like Rāvaṇa eat flesh and drink blood? How can Kumbhakarṇa sleep through six months of the year, and never wake up even though boiling oil was poured into his ears, elephants were made to trample over him, and war trumpets and conches blown around him? They also say that Rāvaṇa captured Indra and dragged him handcuffed into Lanka. Who can do that to Indra? All this looks a bit fantastic and extreme. They are lies and contrary to reason.' With these questions in mind King Śreṇika goes to sage Gautama to have him tell the true story and clear his doubts. Gautama says to him, 'I'll tell you what Jain wise men say. Rāvaṇa is not a demon, he is not a cannibal and a flesh eater. Wrong-thinking poetasters and fools tell these lies.' He then begins to tell his own version of the story (Chandra 1970, 234). Obviously, the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vimalasūri, called *Paumacariya* (Prakrit for the Sanskrit *Padmacarita*), knows its Vālmīki and proceeds to correct its errors and Hindu extravagances. Like other Jain *purāṇas*, this too is a *pratipurāṇa*, an anti- or counter-*purāṇa*. The prefix *prati-*, meaning 'anti-' or 'counter-', is a favourite Jain affix.

Vimalasūri the Jain opens the story not with Rāma's genealogy and greatness, but with Rāvaṇa's. Rāvaṇa is one of the sixty-three leaders or *śalākāpuruṣas* of the Jain tradition. He is noble, learned, earns all his magical powers and weapons through austerities (*tapas*), and is a devotee of Jain masters. To please one of them, he even takes a vow that he will not touch any unwilling woman. In one memorable incident, he lays siege to an impregnable fort. The queen of that kingdom is in love with him and sends him her messenger; he uses her knowledge of the fort to breach it and defeat the king. But, as soon as he conquers it, he returns the kingdom to the king and advises the queen to return to her husband. Later, he is shaken to his roots when he hears from soothsayers that he will meet his end through a woman, Sītā. It is such a Rāvaṇa who falls in love with Sītā's beauty, abducts her, tries to win her favours in vain, watches himself fall, and finally dies on the battlefield. In these tellings, he is a great man undone by a passion that he has vowed against but that he cannot resist. In another tradition of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, Sītā is his daughter, although he does not know it: the dice of tragedy are loaded against him further by this oedipal situation. I shall say more about Sītā's birth in the next section.

In fact, to our modern eyes, this Rāvaṇa is a tragic figure; we are moved to admiration and pity for Rāvaṇa when the Jains tell the story. I should mention one more motif: according to the Jain way of thinking, a pair of antagonists, Vāsudeva and Prativāsudeva—a hero and an antihero, almost like self and Other—are destined to fight in life after life. Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa are the eighth incarnations of this pair. They are born in age after age, meet each other in battle after many vicissitudes, and in every encounter Vāsudeva inevitably kills his counterpart, his *prati*. Rāvaṇa learns at the end that Lakṣmaṇa is such a Vāsudeva come to take his life. Still, overcoming his despair after a last unsuccessful attempt at peace, he faces his destined enemy in battle with his most powerful magic weapons. When finally he hurls his discus (*cakra*), it doesn't work for him. Recognising Lakṣmaṇa as a Vāsudeva, it does not behead him but gives itself over to his hand. Thus Lakṣmaṇa slays Rāvaṇa with his own cherished weapon.

Here Rāma does not even kill Rāvaṇa, as he does in the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇas*. For Rāma is an evolved Jain soul who has conquered his passions; this is his last birth, so he is loath to kill anything. It is left to Lakṣmaṇa, who goes to hell while Rāma finds release (*kaivalya*).

One hardly need add that the *Paumacariya* is filled with references to Jain places of pilgrimage, stories about Jain monks, and Jain homilies and legends. Furthermore, since the Jains consider themselves rationalists—unlike the Hindus, who, according to them, are given to exorbitant and often bloodthirsty fancies and rituals—they systematically avoid episodes involving miraculous births (Rāma and his brothers are born in the normal way), blood sacrifices, and the like. They even

rationalise the conception of Rāvaṇa as the Ten-headed Demon. When he was born, his mother was given a necklace of nine gems, which she put around his neck. She saw his face reflected in them ninefold and so called him Daśamukha, or the Ten-faced One. The monkeys too are not monkeys but a clan of celestials (*vidyādharas*) actually related to Rāvaṇa and his family through their great grandfathers. They have monkeys as emblems on their flags: hence the name Vānaras or 'monkeys'.

FROM WRITTEN TO ORAL

Let's look at one of the South Indian folk *Rāmāyaṇas*. In these, the story usually occurs in bits and pieces. For instance, in Kannada, we are given separate narrative poems on Sītā's birth, her wedding, her chastity test, her exile, the birth of Lava and Kuśa, their war with their father Rāma, and so on. But we do have one complete telling of the Rāma story by traditional bards (*tambūri dāsayyas*), sung with a refrain repeated every two lines by a chorus. For the following discussion, I am indebted to the transcription by Rāmē Gowḍa, P.K. Rājaśēkara and S. Basavaiah (1973).

This folk narrative, sung by an Untouchable bard, opens with Rāvaṇa (here called Ravuḷa) and his queen Maṇḍodari. They are unhappy and childless. So Rāvaṇa or Ravuḷa goes to the forest, performs all sorts of self-mortifications like rolling on the ground till blood runs from his back, and meets a *jōgi*, or holy mendicant, who is none other than Śiva. Śiva gives him a magic mango and asks him how he would share it with his wife. Ravuḷa says, 'Of course, I'll give her the sweet flesh of the fruit and I'll lick the mango seed.' The *jōgi* is skeptical. He says to Ravuḷa, 'You say one thing to me. You have poison in your belly. You're giving me butter to eat, but you mean something else. If you lie to me, you'll eat the fruit of your actions yourself.' Ravuḷa has one thing in his dreams and another in his waking world, says the poet. When he brings the mango home, with all sorts of flowers and incense for the ceremonial *pūjā*, Maṇḍodari is very happy. After a ritual *pūjā* and prayers to Śiva, Ravuḷa is ready to share the mango. But he thinks, 'If I give her the fruit, I'll be hungry, she'll be full,' and quickly gobbles up the flesh of the fruit, giving her only the seed to lick. When she throws it in the yard, it sprouts and grows into a tall mango tree. Meanwhile, Ravuḷa himself becomes pregnant, his pregnancy advancing a month each day.

> In one day, it was a month, O Śiva.
> In the second, it was the second month,
> and cravings began for him, O Śiva.
> How shall I show my face to the world of men, O Śiva.
> On the third day, it was the third month,
> How shall I show my face to the world, O Śiva.
> On the fourth day, it was the fourth month.
> How can I bear this, O Śiva.
> Five days, and it was five months,
> O lord, you've given me trouble, O Śiva
> I can't bear it, I can't bear it, O Śiva
> How will I live, cries Ravuḷa in misery.
> Six days, and he is six months gone, O mother,
> in seven days it was seven months.
> O what shame, Ravuḷa in his seventh month,
> and soon came the eighth, O Śiva
> Ravuḷa was in his ninth full month.
> When he was round and ready, she's born, the dear,
> Sītā is born through his nose.
> When he sneezes, Sītamma is born,
> And Ravuḷa names her Sītamma.
>
> (Gowda et al. 1973, 150–1; my translation)

In Kannada, the word *sītā* means 'he sneezed': he calls her Sītā because she is born from a sneeze. Her name is thus given a Kannada folk etymology, as in the Sanskrit texts it has a Sanskrit one: there she is named Sītā because King Janaka finds her in a furrow (*sītā*). Then Ravuḷa goes to astrologers, who tell him he is being punished for not keeping his word to Śiva and for eating the flesh of the fruit instead of giving it to his wife. They advise him to feed and dress the child, and leave her some place where she will be found and brought up by some couple. He puts her in a box and leaves her in Janaka's field.

It is only after this story of Sītā's birth that the poet sings of the birth and adventures of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Then comes a long section on Sītā's marriage contest, where Ravuḷa appears and is humiliated when he falls under the heavy bow he has to lift. Rāma lifts it and marries Sītā. After that she is abducted by Ravuḷa. Rāma lays siege to Lanka with his monkey allies, and (in a brief section) recovers Sītā and is crowned king. The poet then returns to the theme of Sītā's trials. She is slandered and exiled, but gives birth to twins who grow up to be warriors. They tie up Rāma's sacrificial horse, defeat the armies sent to guard the horse and finally unite their parents, this time for good.

One sees here not only a different texture and emphasis: the teller is everywhere eager to return to Sītā—her life, her birth, her adoption, her wedding, her abduction and recovery. Whole sections, equal in length to those on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's birth, exile and war against Rāvaṇa, are

devoted to her banishment, pregnancy and reunion with her husband. Furthermore, her abnormal birth as the daughter born directly to the male Rāvaṇa brings to the story a new range of suggestions: the male envy of womb and childbirth, which is a frequent theme in Indian literature, and an Indian oedipal theme of fathers pursuing daughters and, in this case, a daughter causing the death of her incestuous father (see chap. 22, 'The Indian Oedipus', below). The motif of Sītā as Rāvaṇa's daughter is not unknown elsewhere. It occurs in one tradition of the Jain stories (for example, in the *Vasudevahiṁḍi*) and in folk traditions of Kannada and Telugu, as well as in several Southeast Asian *Rāmāyaṇas*. In some, Rāvaṇa in his lusty youth molests a young woman, who vows vengeance and is reborn as his daughter to destroy him. Thus the oral traditions seem to partake of yet another set of themes unknown in Vālmīki.

A SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXAMPLE

When we go outside India to Southeast Asia, we meet with a variety of tellings of the Rāma story in Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java and Indonesia. Here we shall look at only one example, the Thai *Ramakirti*. According to Santosh Desai, nothing else of Hindu origin has affected the tone of Thai life more than the Rāma story (Desai 1980, 63).[7] The bas-reliefs and paintings on the walls of their Buddhist temples, the plays enacted in town and village, their ballets—all of them rework the Rāma story. In succession several kings with the name 'King Rama' wrote *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes in Thai: King Rama I composed a telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in fifty thousand verses, Rama II composed new episodes for dance, and Rama VI added another set of episodes, most taken from Vālmīki. Places in Thailand, such as Lopburi (Sanskrit Lavapuri), Khidkin (Sanskrit Kiṣkindhā), and Ayuthia (Sanskrit Ayodhyā) with its ruins of Khmer and Thai art, are associated with Rāma legends.

The Thai *Ramakirti* (Rāma's glory) or *Ramakien* (Rāma's story) opens with an account of the origins of the three kinds of characters in the story, the human, the demonic, and the simian. The second part describes the brothers' first encounters with the demons, Rāma's marriage and banishment, the abduction of Sītā, and Rāma's meeting with the monkey clan. It also describes the preparations for the war, Hanumān's visit to Lanka and his burning of it, the building of the bridge, the siege of Lanka, the fall of Rāvaṇa, and Rāma's reunion with Sītā. The third part describes an insurrection in Lanka, which Rāma deputes his two youngest brothers to quell. This part also describes the banishment of Sītā, the birth of her sons, their war with Rāma, Sītā's descent into the earth, and the appearance of the gods to reunite Rāma and Sītā. Though many incidents look the same as they do in Vālmīki, many things look different as well. For instance, as in the South India folk *Rāmāyaṇas* (as also in some Jain, Bengali and Kashmiri ones), the banishment of Sītā is given a dramatic new rationale. The daughter of Śūrpaṇakhā (the demoness whom Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa had mutilated years earlier in the forest) is waiting in the wings to take revenge on Sītā, whom she views as finally responsible for her mother's disfigurement. She comes to Ayodhya, enters Sītā's service as a maid, and induces her to draw a picture of Rāvaṇa. The drawing is rendered indelible (in some tellings, it comes to life in her bedroom) and forces itself on Rāma's attention. In a jealous rage, he orders Sītā killed. The compassionate Lakṣmaṇa leaves her alive in the forest, though, and brings back the heart of a deer as witness to the execution.

The reunion between Rāma and Sītā is also different. When Rāma finds out she is still alive, he recalls Sītā to his palace by sending her word that he is dead. She rushes to see him but flies into a rage when she finds she has been tricked. So, in a fit of helpless anger, she calls upon Mother Earth to take her. Hanumān is sent to subterranean regions to bring her back, but she refuses to return. It takes the power of Śiva to reunite them.

Again as in the Jain instances and the South Indian folk poems, the account of Sītā's birth is different from that given in Vālmīki. When Daśaratha performs his sacrifice, he receives a rice ball, not the rice porridge (*pāyasa*) mentioned in Vālmīki. A crow steals some of the rice and takes it to Rāvaṇa's wife, who eats it and gives birth to Sītā. A prophecy that his daughter will cause his death makes Rāvaṇa throw Sītā into the sea, where the sea goddess protects her and takes her to Janaka.

Furthermore, though Rāma is an incarnation of Viṣṇu, in Thailand he is subordinate to Śiva. By and large he is seen as a human hero, and the *Ramakirti* is not regarded as a religious work or even as an exemplary work on which men and women may pattern themselves. The Thais enjoy most the sections about the abduction of Sītā and the war. Partings and reunions, which are the heart of the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇas*, are not as important as the excitement and the details of war, the techniques, the fabulous weapons. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* or the War Book is more elaborate than in any other telling, whereas it is of minor importance in the Kannada folk telling. Desai says this Thai emphasis on war is significant: early Thai history is full of wars; their concern was survival. The focus in the *Ramakien* is not on family values and spirituality. Thai audiences are more fond of Hanumān than of Rāma. Neither celibate nor devout, as in the Hindu

Rāmāyaṇa, here Hanumān is quite a ladies' man, who doesn't at all mind looking into the bedrooms of Lanka and doesn't consider seeing another man's sleeping wife anything immoral, as Vālmīki's or Kampan̲'s Hanumān does.

Rāvaṇa too is different here. The *Ramakirti* admires Rāvaṇa's resourcefulness and learning; his abduction of Sītā is seen as an act of love and is viewed with sympathy. The Thais are moved by Rāvaṇa's sacrifice of family, kingdom and life itself for the sake of a woman. His dying words later provide the theme of a famous love poem of the nineteenth century, an inscription of a Wat of Bangkok (Desai 1980, 85). Unlike Vālmīki's characters, the Thai ones are a fallible, human mixture of good and evil. The fall of Rāvaṇa here makes one sad. It is not an occasion for unambiguous rejoicing, as it is in Vālmīki.

PATTERNS OF DIFFERENCE

Thus, not only do we have one story told by Vālmīki in Sanskrit, we have a variety of Rāma tales told by others, with radical differences among them. Let me outline a few of the differences we have not yet encountered. For instance, in Sanskrit and in the other Indian languages, there are two endings to the story. One ends with the return of Rāma and Sītā to Ayodhya, their capital, to be crowned king and queen of the ideal kingdom. In another ending, often considered a later addition in Vālmīki and in Kampan̲, Rāma hears Sītā slandered as a woman who lived in Rāvaṇa's grove, and in the name of his reputation as a king (we would call it credibility, I suppose) he banishes her to the forest, where she gives birth to twins. They grow up in Vālmīki's hermitage, learn the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as the arts of war from him, win a war over Rāma's army, and in a poignant scene sing the *Rāmāyaṇa* to their own father when he doesn't quite know who they are. Each of these two endings gives the whole work a different cast. The first one celebrates the return of the royal exiles and rounds out the tale with reunion, coronation and peace. In the second one, their happiness is brief, and they are separated again, making separation of loved ones (*vipralambha*) the central mood of the whole work. It can even be called tragic, for Sītā finally cannot bear it any more and enters a fissure in the earth, the mother from whom she had originally come—as we saw earlier, her name means 'furrow', which is where she was originally found by Janaka. It also enacts, in the rise of Sītā from the furrow and her return to the earth, a shadow of a Proserpine-like myth, a vegetation cycle: Sītā is like the seed and Rāma with his cloud-dark body the rain:

Rāvaṇa in the south is the Pluto-like abductor into dark regions (the south is the abode of death); Sītā reappears in purity and glory for a brief period before she returns again to the earth. Such a myth, while it should not be blatantly pressed into some rigid allegory, resonates in the shadows of the tale in many details. Note the many references to fertility and rain, Rāma's opposition to Śiva-like ascetic figures (made explicit by Kampan̲ in the Ahalyā story), his ancestor bringing the river Ganges into the plains of the kingdom to water and revive the ashes of the dead. Relevant also is the story of Ṛśyaśṛṅga, the sexually naive ascetic who is seduced by the beauty of a woman and thereby brings rain to Lomapāda's kingdom, and who later officiates at the ritual which fills Daśaratha's queens' wombs with children. Such a mythic groundswell also makes us hear other tones in the continual references to nature, the potent presence of birds and animals as the devoted friends of Rāma in his search for his Sītā. Birds and monkeys are a real presence and a poetic necessity in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, as much as they are excrescences in the Jain view. With each ending, different effects of the story are highlighted, and the whole telling alters its poetic stance.

One could say similar things about the different beginnings. Vālmīki opens with a frame story about Vālmīki himself. He sees a hunter aim an arrow and kill one of a happy pair of love-birds. The female circles its dead mate and cries over it. The scene so moves the poet and sage Vālmīki that he curses the hunter. A moment later, he realises that his curse has taken the form of a line of verse—in a famous play on words, the rhythm of his grief (*śoka*) has given rise to a metrical form (*śloka*). He decides to write the whole epic of Rāma's adventures in that metre. This incident becomes, in later poetics, the parable of all poetic utterance: out of the stress of natural feeling (*bhāva*), an artistic form has to be found or fashioned, a form which will generalise and capture the essence (*rasa*) of that feeling. This incident at the beginning of Vālmīki gives the work an aesthetic self-awareness. One may go further: the incident of the death of a bird and the separation of loved ones becomes a leitmotif for this telling of the Rāma story. One notes a certain rhythmic recurrence of an animal killed at many of the critical moments: when Daśaratha shoots an arrow to kill what he thinks is an elephant but instead kills a young ascetic filling his pitcher with water (making noises like an elephant drinking at a water hole), he earns a curse that later leads to the exile of Rāma and the separation of father and son. When Rāma pursues a magical golden deer (really a demon in disguise) and kills it, with its last breath it calls out to Lakṣmaṇa in Rāma's voice, which in turn leads to his leaving Sītā

unprotected; this allows Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā. Even as Rāvaṇa carries her off, he is opposed by an ancient bird which he slays with his sword. Furthermore, the death of the bird, in the opening section, and the cry of the surviving mate set the tone for the many separations throughout the work, of brother and brother, mothers and fathers and sons, wives and husbands.

Thus the opening sections of each major work set into motion the harmonics of the whole poem, presaging themes and a pattern of images. Kampan̲'s Tamil text begins very differently. One can convey it best by citing a few stanzas.

THE RIVER

The cloud, wearing white
on white like Śiva
making beautiful the sky
on his way from the sea

grew dark

as the face of the Lord
who wears with pride
on his right the Goddess
of the scented breasts. [2]

Mistaking the Himalayan dawn
for a range of gold,
the clouds let down chains
and chains of gleaming rain.

They pour like a generous giver
giving all he has,
remembering and reckoning
all he has. [15]

It floods, it runs over
its continents like the fame
of a great king, upright,
infallible, reigning by the Laws
under cool royal umbrellas. [16]

Concubines caressing
their lovers' hair, their lovers'
bodies, their lovers' limbs,

take away whole hills
of wealth yet keep little
in their spendthrift hands

as they move on: so too
the waters flow from the peaks
to the valleys,

beginning high and reaching low. [17]

The flood carrying all before it
like merchants, caravans
loaded with gold, pearls,
peacock feathers and rows
of white tusk and fragrant woods. [18]

Bending to a curve, the river,
surface coloured by petals,
gold yellow pollen, honey,
the ochre flow of elephant lust,
looked much like a rainbow. [19]

Ravaging hillsides, uprooting trees,
covered with fallen leaves all over,
the waters came,

like a monkey clan
facing restless seas
looking for a bridge. [20]

Thick-faced proud elephants
ranged with foaming cavalier horses
filling the air with the noise of war,

raising banners,
the flood rushes
as for a battle with the sea. [22]

Stream of numberless kings
in the line of the Sun,
continuous in virtue:

the river branches into deltas,
mother's milk to all lives
on the salt sea-surrounded land. [23]

Scattering a robber camp on the hills
with a rain of arrows,

the scared women beating their bellies
and gathering bow and arrow as they run,

the waters assault villages
like the armies of a king. [25]

Stealing milk and buttermilk,
guzzling on warm ghee and butter
straight from the pots on the ropes,

leaning the *marutam* tree on the *kuruntam*,
carrying away the clothes and bracelets
of goatherd girls at water games,

like Kṛṣṇa dancing
on the spotted snake,
the waters are naughty. [26]

Turning forest into slope,
field into wilderness,
seashore into fertile land,

changing boundaries,
exchanging landscapes,
the reckless waters

roared on like the pasts
that hurry close on the heels
of lives. [28]

Born of Himalayan stone
and mingling with the seas,
it spreads, ceaselessly various,

one and many at once,

like that Original
even the measureless Vedas
cannot measure with words. [30]

Through pollen-dripping groves,
clumps of champak,
lotus pools,

water places with new sands,
flowering fields cross-fenced
with creepers,

like a life filling
and emptying
a variety of bodies,

the river flows on. [31][8]

This passage is unique to Kampan̲; it is not found in Vālmīki. It describes the waters as they are gathered by clouds from the seas and

come down in rain and flow as floods of the Sarayū river down to Ayodhya, the capital of Rāma's kingdom. Through it, Kampan̲ introduces all his themes and emphases, even his characters, his concern with fertility themes (implicit in Vālmīki), the whole dynasty of Rāma's ancestors, and his vision of *bhakti* through the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Note the variety of themes introduced through the similes and allusions, each aspect of the water symbolising an aspect of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story itself and representing a portion of the *Rāmāyaṇa* universe (for example, monkeys), picking up as it goes along characteristic Tamil traditions not to be found anywhere else, like the five landscapes of classical Tamil poetry. The emphasis on water itself, the source of life and fertility, is also an explicit part of the Tamil literary tradition. The *Kuṟaḷ*—the so-called Bible of the Tamils, a didactic work on the ends and means of the good life—opens with a passage on God and follows it up immediately with a great ode in celebration of the rains (*Tirukkuṟaḷ* 2).

Another point of difference among *Rāmāyaṇas* is the intensity of focus on a major character. Vālmīki focuses on Rāma and his history in his opening sections; Vimalasūri's Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Thai epic focus not on Rāma but on the genealogy and adventures of Rāvaṇa; the Kannada village telling focuses on Sītā, her birth, her wedding, her trials. Some later extensions like the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* and the Tamil story of *Śatakanṭharāvaṇa* even give Sītā a heroic character: when the ten-headed Rāvaṇa is killed, another appears with a hundred heads: Rāma cannot handle this new menace, so it is Sītā who goes to war and slays the new demon (see Shulman 1979). The Santals, a tribe known for their extensive oral traditions, even conceive of Sītā as unfaithful—to the shock and horror of any Hindu bred on Vālmīki or Kampan̲, she is seduced both by Rāvaṇa and by Lakṣmaṇa. In Southeast Asian texts, as we saw earlier, Hanumān is not the celibate devotee with a monkey face but a ladies' man who figures in many love episodes. In Kampan̲ and Tulsī, Rāma is a god; in the Jain texts, he is only an evolved Jain man who is in his last birth and so does not even kill Rāvaṇa. In the latter, Rāvaṇa is a noble hero fated by his karma to fall for Sītā and bring death upon himself, while he is in other texts an overweening demon. Thus in the conception of every major character there are radical differences, so different indeed that one conception is quite abhorrent to those who hold another. We may add to these many more: elaborations on the reason why Sītā is banished, the miraculous creation of Sītā's second son and the final reunion of Rāma and Sītā. Every one of these occurs in more than one text, in more

than one textual community (Hindu, Jain or Buddhist), in more than one region.

Now, is there a common core to the Rāma stories, except the most skeletal set of relations like that of Rāma, his brother, his wife and the antagonist Rāvaṇa who abducts her? Are the stories bound together only by certain family resemblances, as Wittgenstein might say? Or is it like Aristotle's jack-knife? When the philosopher asked an old carpenter how long he had had his knife, the latter said, 'Oh, I've had it for thirty years. I've changed the blade a few times and the handle a few times, but it's the same knife.' Some shadow of a relational structure claims the name of *Rāmāyaṇa* for all these tellings, but on a closer look one is not necessarily all that like another. Like a collection of people with the same proper name, they make a class in name alone.

THOUGHTS ON TRANSLATION

That may be too extreme a way of putting it. Let me back up and say it differently, in a way that covers more adequately the differences between the texts and their relations to each other, for they *are* related. One might think of them as a series of translations clustering around one or another in a family of texts: a number of them cluster around Vālmīki, another set around the Jain Vimalasūri, and so on.

Or these translation-relations between texts could be thought of in Peircean terms, at least in three ways.[9]

Where Text 1 and Text 2 have a geometrical resemblance to each other, as one triangle to another (whatever the angles, sizes, or colours of the lines), we call such a relation *iconic*. In the West, we generally expect translations to be 'faithful', i.e., iconic. Thus, when Chapman translates Homer, he not only preserves basic textual features such as characters, imagery and order of incidents, but tries to reproduce a hexameter and retain the same number of lines as in the original Greek—only the language is English and the idiom Elizabethan. When Kampaṉ retells Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in Tamil, he is largely faithful in keeping to the order and sequence of episodes, the structural relations between the characters of father, son, brothers, wives, friends, and enemies. But the iconicity is limited to such structural relations. His work is much longer than Vālmīki's, for example, and it is composed in more than twenty different kinds of Tamil metres, while Vālmīki's is mostly in the *śloka* metre.

Very often, although Text 2 stands in an iconic relationship to Text 1

in terms of basic elements such as plot, it is filled with local detail, folklore, poetic traditions, imagery, and so forth—as in Kampaṉ's telling or that of the Bengali Kṛttivāsa. In the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma's wedding is very much a Bengali wedding, with Bengali customs and Bengali cuisine (Sen 1920). We may call such a text *indexical*: the text is embedded in a locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it, and would not make much sense without it. Here, one may say, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not merely a set of individual texts, but a genre with a variety of instances.

Now and then, as we have seen, Text 2 uses the plot and characters and names of Text 1 minimally and uses them to say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text. We may call such a translation *symbolic*. The word *translation* itself here acquires a somewhat mathematical sense: of mapping a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system. When this happens, the Rāma story has become almost a second language of the whole culture area, a shared core of names, characters, incidents, and motifs, with a narrative language in which Text 1 can say one thing and Text 2 something else, even the exact opposite. Vālmīki's Hindu and Vimalasūri's Jain texts in India—or the Thai *Ramakirti* in Southeast Asia—are such symbolic translations of each other.

One must not forget that to some extent all translations, even the so-called faithful iconic ones, inevitably have all three kinds of elements. When Goldman (1984–) and his group of scholars produce a modern translation of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, they are iconic in the transliteration of Sanskrit names, the number and sequence of verses, the order of the episodes, and so forth. But they are also indexical, in that the translation is in English idiom and comes equipped with introductions and explanatory footnotes, which inevitably contain twentieth-century attitudes and misprisions; and symbolic, in that they cannot avoid conveying through this translation modern understandings proper to their reading of the text. But the proportions between the three kinds of relations differ vastly between Kampaṉ and Goldman. And we accordingly read them for different reasons and with different aesthetic expectations. We read the scholarly modern English translation largely to gain a sense of the original Vālmīki, and we consider it successful to the extent that it resembles the original. We read Kampaṉ to read Kampaṉ, and we judge him on his own terms—not by his resemblance to Vālmīki but, if anything, by the extent that he differs from Vālmīki. In the one, we rejoice in the similarity; in the other, we cherish and savour the differences.

One may go further and say that the cultural area in which *Rāmāyaṇas*

are endemic has a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships. Oral, written, and performance traditions, phrases, proverbs, and even sneers carry allusions to the Rāma story. When someone is carrying on, you say, 'What's this *Rāmāyaṇa* now? Enough.' In Tamil, a narrow room is called a *kiṣkindhā*; a proverb about a dim-witted person says, 'After hearing the *Rāmāyaṇa* all night, he asks how Rāma is related to Sītā'; in a Bengali arithmetic textbook, children are asked to figure the dimensions of what is left of a wall that Hanumān built, after he has broken down part of it in mischief. And to these must be added marriage songs, narrative poems, place legends, temple myths, paintings, sculpture, and the many performing arts.

These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context. The great texts rework the small ones, for 'lions are made of sheep,' as Valéry said. And sheep are made of lions, too: a folk legend says that Hanumān wrote the original *Rāmāyaṇa* on a mountain-top, after the great war, and scattered the manuscript; it was many times larger than what we have now. Vālmīki is said to have captured only a fragment of it.[10] In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already'.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LISTEN

This essay opened with a folktale about the many *Rāmāyaṇas*. Before we close, it may be appropriate to tell another tale about Hanumān and Rāma's ring. But this story is about the power of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, about what happens when you really listen to this potent story. Even a fool cannot resist it; he is entranced and caught up in the action. The listener can no longer bear to be a bystander but feels compelled to enter the world of the epic: the line between fiction and reality is erased.

A villager who had no sense of culture and no interest in it was married to a woman who was very cultured. She tried various ways to cultivate his taste for the higher things in life but he just wasn't interested.

One day a great reciter of that grand epic the *Rāmāyaṇa* came to the village. Every evening he would sing, recite, and explain the verses of the epic. The whole village went to this one-man performance as if it were a rare feast.

The woman who was married to the uncultured dolt tried to interest him in the performance. She nagged him and nagged him, trying to force him to go and listen. This time, he grumbled as usual but decided to humour her. So he went in the evening and sat at the back. It was an all-night performance, and he just couldn't keep awake. He slept through the night. Early in the morning, when a canto had ended and the reciter sang the closing verses for the day, sweets were distributed according to custom. Someone put some sweets into the mouth of the sleeping man. He woke up soon after and went home. His wife was delighted that her husband had stayed through the night and asked him eagerly how he enjoyed the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He said, 'It was very sweet.' The wife was happy to hear it.

The next day too his wife insisted on his listening to the epic. So he went to the enclosure where the reciter was performing, sat against a wall, and before long fell fast asleep. The place was crowded and a young boy sat on his shoulder, made himself comfortable, and listened open-mouthed to the fascinating story. In the morning, when the night's portion of the story came to an end, everyone got up and so did the husband. The boy had left earlier, but the man felt aches and pains from the weight he had borne all night. When he went home and his wife asked him eagerly how it was, he said, 'It got heavier and heavier by morning.' The wife said, 'That's the way the story is.' She was happy that her husband was at last beginning to feel the emotions and the greatness of the epic.

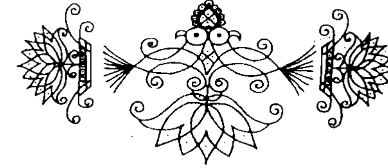
On the third day, he sat at the edge of the crowd and was so sleepy that he lay down on the floor and even snored. Early in the morning, a dog came that way and pissed into his mouth a little before he woke up and went home. When his wife asked him how it was, he moved his mouth this way and that, made a face and said, 'Terrible. It was so salty.' His wife knew something was wrong. She asked him what exactly was happening and didn't let up till he finally told her how he had been sleeping through the performance every night.

On the fourth day, his wife went with him, sat him down in the very first row, and told him sternly that he should keep awake no matter what might happen. So he sat dutifully in the front row and began to listen. Very soon, he was caught up in the adventures and the characters of the great epic story. On that day, the reciter was enchanting the audience with a description of how Hanumān the monkey had to leap across the ocean to take Rāma's signet ring to Sītā. When Hanumān was leaping across the

ocean, the signet ring slipped from his hand and fell into the ocean. Hanumān didn't know what to do. He had to get the ring back quickly and take it to Sītā in the demon's kingdom. While he was wringing his hands, the husband who was listening with rapt attention in the first row said, 'Hanumān, don't worry. I'll get it for you.' Then he jumped up and dived into the ocean, found the ring on the ocean floor, brought it back, and gave it to Hanumān.

Everyone was astonished. They thought this man was someone special, really blessed by Rāma and Hanumān. Ever since, he has been respected in the village as a wise elder, and he has also behaved like one. That's what happens when you really listen to a story, especially to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[11]

Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*



I

No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit. As one such native, I know the Hindu epics, not as a Sanskritist (which I am not), but through Kannada and Tamil, mostly through the oral traditions. I've heard bits and pieces of it in a tailor's shop where a pundit used to regale us with *Mahābhārata* stories and large sections of a sixteenth-century Kannada text; from brahman cooks in the house; from an older boy who loved to keep us spellbound with it (and the Kannada *Arabian Nights* which he was reading in the Oriental Library) after cricket, in the evenings, under a large *neem* tree in a wealthy engineer's compound; from a somewhat bored algebra teacher who switched from the binomial theorem to the problems of Draupadī and her five husbands. Then there were professional bards who 'did the Harikathā Kālakṣepam', redeeming the time with holy tales (and not always holy ones). They were invited into a neighbourhood by a group or a wealthy man, and they would recite, sing and tell the *Mahābhārata* in sections night after night, usually under a temporary canopy (*paṇḍāl*) lit by petromax lanterns, with a floating audience sitting on rugs on the street and on the verandas of houses that lined the street now turned into a makeshift auditorium. They sang songs in several languages, told folktales, sometimes danced, quoted Sanskrit tags as well as the daily newspaper, and made the *Mahābhārata* entertaining, didactic and relevant to the listener's present.

The *Mahābhārata* provides materials and allusions to every artistic genre—from plays to proverbs, from folk performances to movies and TV. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* have appeared as serials, week after week in popular Tamil weeklies. C. Rajagopalachari, the veteran statesman, who was dedicated to bringing traditional wisdom

into modern politics, retold them in Tamil, and later translated them into English. When they were published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, they became, and probably still are, the most-read paperback renditions in English of the epics. The *Mahābhārata* also occurs in various sizes and in many languages—from proverbs like 'Whatever you say, Kunti's children have no kingdom' (Kannada: *antu intu kunti makkaḷige rājyavilla*) to one-or-two-hour versions, to the South Indian Sanskrit redaction which has 100,000 stanzas. Then there are 'translations', transpositions truly, into the many Indian mother tongues, extensions into active cults and local communal performances where Draupadī or the Pāṇḍavas possess the actors and members of the audience. Two of these possession cults, the Pāṇḍavilla in Himachal Pradesh (Sax 1987) and especially the Draupadī cult in Tamilnadu (Hiltebeitel 1987), have been studied in some detail.

Thus a text like the *Mahābhārata* is not a text but a tradition. It used to be every poet's ambition to write a *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata*. Subramanya Bharati's best narrative poem is a Tamil reworking of Draupadī's vow (*Pāñcāli Capatam*), where Draupadī's public dishonour at the hands of the villain Duḥśāsana represents the plight of all women in a male society and it also represented the British oppression of 'Mother India'. The poem has recently become popular with street-theatre troupes in Tamilnadu who use it as their script. Several years ago, K.V. Puttappa won national honours for his *Rāmāyaṇa Darśanam* in Kannada, as did V.S. Khandekar's Marathi novel *Yayāti*. Recently Bhairappa, a well-known Kannada novelist, has written a long novel on the *Mahābhārata* story, giving it ethnographic interpretations. Two of the best modern plays, to mention only two, are Girish Karnad's *Yayāti* in Kannada and Dharam Vir Bharati's *Andhāyug* in Hindi, both inspired by the epic. So was Shyam Benegal's Hindi film *Kalyug*.

The size of the *Mahābhārata* appalls non-Indian readers. It is said to be eight times the size of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* put together. 'What is here may be elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else', says a verse in praise of the text. Another such verse says, 'The whole world is Vyāsa's leftovers'—he has tasted, chewed and digested whole worlds. Both the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the story of the Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs are in its maw.

Yet the main, complex, many-storied plot of this enormous epic is remembered and recalled in great detail by most traditional Hindus. Such recall is possible because it is a *structured* work. In a largely oral tradition, one learns one's major literary works as one learns a

language—in bits and pieces that fit together and make a whole in the learner's mind, because they are parts that reflect an underlying structure. Later tradition calls the *Mahābhārata* an *itihāsa* 'that's the way it was' or a 'history', not a *kāvya*, 'poem', denying it structure and composition. Yet the great Sanskrit aesthetician, Ānandavardhana, treats the main epic story as a poem with a coherent central mood, all its parts and plots and characters cohering into a final sense of *śānta rasa* or 'tranquillity' (Tubb 1985). Whether we agree with that description or not, it is clear that Ānandavardhana saw it not as an unstructured monster but as a well-formed whole. Recent Indian and Western scholars have talked of hundreds of interpolations in the text; they see the work as a 'loose-leaf file of palm leaves' with a knot (*grantha*) that holds the leaves together, to which anything at all could be, and was, added by anyone at all at different times. The name Vyāsa, they point out, indicated an 'editor', a 'compiler', not an author. Yet all these descriptions belie and deny the native's sense of its unity, its well-plotted network of relations. Only the 'epic' is what's known everywhere in the regional languages, what the native speaker and listener remembers vividly and without fail. The so-called brahmanical 'pseudo-epic', which is not 'pseudo' but an integral part of the Sanskrit epic, and the many discourses (including the *Gītā*) are not recited as part of the story in the oral traditions or in the endless reworkings and abridgements in the mother tongues, in oral and written traditions.

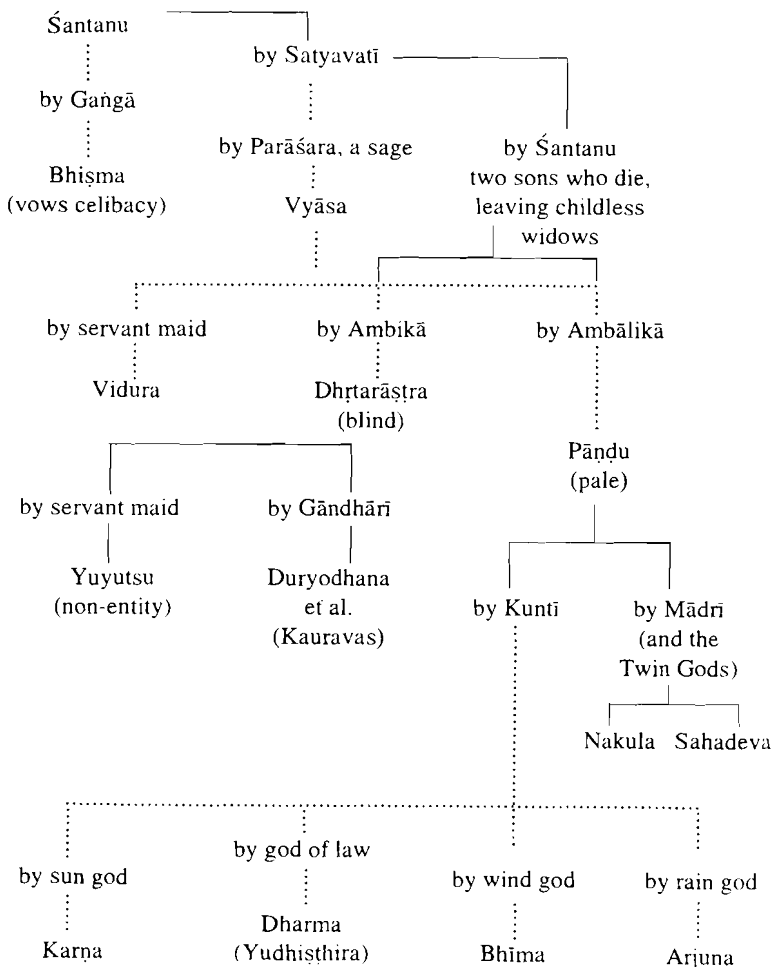
The present attempt is to explicate a 'native intuition', the intricate sense of structure and unity in this ten-mile monster of a work. I use 'intuition' not in any occult sense, but as linguists use it—the sense that every native speaker has of the grammar of his mother tongue which makes him speak grammatically and judge what is or is not grammatical.

II

I'd suggest that the central structuring principle of the epic is a certain kind of repetition. One might say that repetition or replication is the central principle of any structuring. What occurs only once does not allow us to talk of structure. *Einmal ist keinmal*—it's as if what happens once doesn't happen at all. Students of narrative like Propp, Levi-Strauss, Dumézil, and J. Hillis Miller have made this idea a commonplace. Indian artworks, like the Hindu temple, or the decade (*pattu*) of Tamil classical or *bhakti* poetry, or the *rāgas* of Karnatak music, are built on the principle of interacting structures of repetition and elaboration and variation. Not

only are there repetitive phrases, similes and formulaic descriptions that the students of oral poetics (Parry, Lord, et al.) have taught us to recognise, but incidents, scenes, settings and especially relationships are repeated. Let us look at one large overarching example of replicated relationships.

Here is a genealogical chart of the main characters.



The chart is redrawn from the regular kinship diagram to show the double espousal and the double parentage of the major characters. Certain patterns of repetition may be noted as follows.

1. Śantanu, as well as Satyavatī, has a human and a supernatural lover. Śantanu has goddess Gaṅgā on whom he begets Bhīṣma; and by human Satyavatī he has two sons. Satyavatī has had a liaison with Parāśara, a sage with supernatural powers (and a very human lust) and she has a son Vyāsa by him. Vyāsa, too, is a sage with supernatural powers. He is the author of the *Mahābhārata* as well as the ancestor of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas.

Śantanu and Satyavatī's two sons (Citrāṅgada and Vicitravīrya) die childless, leaving two widows, Ambikā and Ambālikā. At Satyavatī's behest, sage Vyāsa begets two sons on them, Dhṛtarāṣṭra the Blind and Pāndu the Pale. Thus each of these two widows too has a supernatural and a human lover.

At this point, there is a clear division. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's progeny by Gāndhārī is entirely human. But Pāṇḍu, cursed by a sage to die if he makes love, permits his wives Kuntī and Mādrī to invoke gods and get sons by them. Thus Kuntī and Mādrī too have supernatural and human lovers—actually Kuntī almost overdoes it, trying it once before marriage and three times after. Like Satyavatī, her virginity too is returned to her by her supernatural, premarital lover.

Thus, for three generations, practically every major male character, from Bhīṣma to Sahadeva, has a human and a supernatural parent. The only exceptions are the Kaurava brothers. When we reach the third generation, we have two sets of cousins, the Kauravas whose parents are entirely human and the Pāṇḍavas, fathered by the gods. That's when the battle is joined.

2. Bhīṣma, Vyāsa, Vidura, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and finally Karṇa are all born to their mothers before they were married or after they were widowed. The two legitimate sons born to Śantanu and Satyavatī die childless. Bhīṣma takes an oath of celibacy and abdicates his right to the throne; Vyāsa and Vidura are celibate sage figures. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is blind. Pāṇḍu is born pale and, after a brief reign, earns a curse which makes sex a mortal act, and unmans him. Thus, beginning with Bhīṣma's self-chosen celibacy and abdication, the succession totters, oscillating from brother to brother (Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu) and from cousin to cousin (Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas). The war books also show the fortunes of war similarly vacillating between victory and defeat.

3. Not only are relationships (like Satyavatī's past and Kuntī's past) repeated to make patterns, and patterns of patterns. The appearance of certain characters and settings punctuates the continuity of narrative with patterns of repetition. For instance, Gaṅgā as a goddess and as a river

appears several times: she is the mother of Bhiṣma, and the river carries/fosters Karṇa when he is abandoned by Kuntī, his mother. So both men are called Gāṅgeya, 'son of Gaṅgā'. The river is the setting of the great war, and it is on its banks that Dhṛtarāṣṭra gets a vision of all the war dead.

4. Fires occur over and over again. Duryodhana conspires to burn the Pāṇḍavas in a house of lacquer, but in their stead a hunter woman (*Niṣāda*) and her five sons die—as later in Aśvatthāmā's rampage, the Pāṇḍavas' own five sons die as surrogates for the Pāṇḍavas. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna destroy a forest (*Khāṇḍava*) and all its denizens by fire, as an offering to the fire god, Agni.

5. A minor character like Durvāsas appears in the life of Kuntī as well as Draupadī. And Kālidāsa, when he reworks the Śakuntalā story from the *Mahābhārata*, brings Durvāsas into her life as well.

6. Whole situations like the heroes' exile and disguise are replicated. Such replications can be simultaneous, suffered by several characters at different times, like the Pāṇḍavas living in exile and disguise in Virāṭa's court; or successive, at different stages of the same lives, like the Pāṇḍavas who disguise themselves as brahmans after the first attempt on their lives, and later as different kinds of professionals in Virāṭa's court. Or the repetitive events may be concentric, or nested, as in the inset story of Nala who too lives in exile and disguise. Lastly, life lived incognito is personified in Karṇa whose destiny is governed by the fact that neither he nor most others around him know who he is—a situation that gives rise to many poignant ironies and reversals.

Such repetitive elements foreshadow later events and recapture earlier ones. Two major examples will do to make the point. Draupadī is outraged first in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court with the elders' connivance and her husbands looking on, unmanned and helpless. When she is molested again in Virāṭa's court, abetted by the queen, her husbands are helpless because they have to lie low in disguise. But the episode is given a different ending. This time Bhīma does not put his anger aside. He beats her molester Kīcaka to a pulp and kills him—exactly foreshadowing what he would later do to Duḥśāsana, the first molester. The death of Kīcaka too is part of a series. For, in the epic, only five men were known to be equal to each other in strength, in the art of wielding a mace, and in wrestling: Jarāsandha, Kīcaka, Śalya, Bhīma and Duryodhana. Jarāsandha was killed early in the epic: Kṛṣṇa arranges that. Now Kīcaka is killed, later Śalya—so that Bhīma and Duryodhana alone are left for the final combat. The serial elimination of equals, like the gradual amassing of weapons by Arjuna and Karṇa, the two sworn opponents, is part of the epic progression.

One of the major instances of repetition concerns the *Bhagavadgītā*.[1] Scholars have debated whether the *Gītā* belongs in the epic at all; editors have called it an interpolation. But to the native reader, it belongs incontrovertibly; artistically and structurally, it is firmly in place. Its central incident—a warrior suffers a failure of nerve, an attack of cowardice, before battle, but he is then counselled and urged into battle—occurs at least five times in the epic. But the most ironic parallel incident occurs immediately before the big battle scenes, as a comic scene in the *Virāṭa Parva*.

When Duryodhana hears of Kīcaka's death, he at once suspects the Pāṇḍavas' presence in the Virāṭa court. He lays siege to Virāṭa's country to smoke out the Pāṇḍavas. (If they are discovered in the year of living icognito, they would have to go back to the forest for twelve years again). Then, as Virāṭa's army gets ready for battle, Uttara the crown prince, darling of the palace women, boasts that if only he had a proper charioteer he would take on the Kauravas and rout them. Draupadī, who is disguised as a servant-maid, slyly suggests that Bṛhannaḍā, who is really Arjuna disguised as a eunuch dancing-master, knew Arjuna well and was his charioteer. After some ironic play on this situation, and after protesting that he, a mere dancing-master, couldn't really wear armour or mount a horse, Arjuna/Bṛhannaḍā agrees. Uttara then ostentatiously prepares for battle, patronises Arjuna, then gets into his chariot. As Arjuna drives it between the contending armies, Uttara is overwhelmed by the array of shining spears, the trumpeting war-elephants and the dazzling host of warriors. He loses nerve and runs from the battlefield. Arjuna follows, catches him by the scruff of his neck and asks him, 'Who do you think you are?' When Uttara falls at his feet and asks Arjuna to save him from certain death in battle, Arjuna relents. He then retrieves, with Uttara's help, his divine weapons (left on a tree before the five brothers entered service with Virāṭa). He asks Uttara to be his charioteer while he fights the battle. As he strings his divine bow Gāṇḍīva and strums it, Uttara is dazzled by his erstwhile eunuch dancing-master, now changed into a commanding hero. Uttara asks him who he really is. Arjuna reveals his true identity. He recites his ten sonorous names: Phalguna, Savyasācī, Dhanañjaya, etc. Then, as Uttara is still amazed, he amazes him further by riding into the thick of battle and beating off the enemies.

The very next book opens with Arjuna in the chariot with Kṛṣṇa as the

charioteer. When Arjuna's chariot moves between the two armies, Arjuna is conscience-stricken at the sight of his cousins, elders and teachers whom he may have to kill. He loses his nerve and his appetite for battle. Then Kṛṣṇa asks him the same question that Arjuna asks of Uttara, 'Who do you think you are?' and reminds him of his true nature as a kṣatriya whose duty is here and now, to take part in battle. Kṛṣṇa further tells him that the real war is being fought by him, Kṛṣṇa, not Arjuna. Thus Kṛṣṇa, who began as a non-combatant and a charioteer, is seen to be the true war-maker, and Arjuna the warrior only a *nimitta*, an excuse and an instrument. At the end, Kṛṣṇa reveals his blinding, terrifying, cosmic form as Time the devourer of all, and he also describes himself in a hundred ways (just as Arjuna recites his ten names earlier). As in the earlier Uttara episode, here too several reversals take place between actor/agent, charioteer/warrior, eunuch/potent male. As victory earlier is falsely attributed to Uttara's efforts, now it is attributed to Arjuna's prowess. The former episode tells of the growing-up of Uttara, as the *Gītā* episode depicts the growing-up of Arjuna. What seems like a playful rehearsal in the *Virāṭa Parva* becomes earnest in the *Udyoga Parva*. Uttara's cowardice and Arjuna's self-revelation are physical, as Arjuna's cowardice and Kṛṣṇa's self-revelation are metaphysical.

As one rereads or remembers such episodes in the *Mahābhārata*, one is reminded of Henry James on Flaubert's careful *mots juste*, designed and planted in his novels with infinite care. Though the *Mahābhārata* has qualified in the eyes of many as 'a loose baggy monster' (Henry James' phrase about nineteenth-century novels), a second look at the foreshadowings and recapitulations make one think of Flaubert, except on an epic scale. Henry James spoke of how the elements in Flaubert were

> . . . always so related and associated, so properly a part of something else that is in turn part of something other, part of a reference, a tone, a passage, or page, that the simple may enjoy it for the least bearing and the initiated for the greatest.

III

This may be the place to talk briefly of the many substories (*upākhyāna*) that participate in and intensify the repetition of events. To give only two examples: just when Bhīṣma decides to give up his sexual and political life so that his father may marry again, the story of Yayāti is told as a kind of model and precedent. Puru transfers his youth to his aged father Yayāti and thereby earns merit. Such appropriate reminiscence speaks of a kind of mythic imprinting, motivating present action (Ramanujan 1972,

1983). To cite another instance, one of many, when Yudhiṣṭhira is despondent, having lost everything at dice, now exiled in a forest, a sage tells him the story of Nala. Nala, too, has gambled away a kingdom and lost it to a brother, has even lost his wife in the forest, is bitten by a serpent which turns out to be literally a blessing in disguise—for it turns his body ugly and unrecognizable until his exile ends. But, in the end, the story restores him to his wife, gives him skills in dice so that he wins back his kingdom. As he listens to this story, Yudhiṣṭhira sees that his plight is not singular and that he is only a half-finished story, with him still in exile (Ramanujan 1980).

Thus, these scores of tales that seem to interrupt the main action have a narrative function. They are performative, i.e., they too are acts, not merely explanations. They add the vector of past and precedent to present and future. They are 'bovariste', as the French would say. (Madame Bovary's fantasies and later actions are moulded by the cheap romances of her youth—a process aptly called 'bovarisme' by Gaultier). They also help in amassing repetitive networks and density, to make the heroes' lives not singular but representative, tokens of a type.

IV

Many of these features are also replicated in the local texture of significant passages. Many waves of many amplitudes meet here—as in a harmonic series. A passage like the description of the first contest between Arjuna and Karṇa is only one among many. It is one node of the larger rhythms of the epic. Before reading the rest of this page, the reader might want to refresh his memory of the following passage I'm going to discuss (van Buitenen's translation of the episode of 'The Fire in the Lacquer House', in the *Ādi Parva* [1973], 276–82).

> When the day came, the king and his councillors arrived, preceded by Bhīṣma and Kṛpa, the first of the teachers, and they entered the royal stand that, decked with gold leaf, was screened off by pearl-studded lattice and paved with beryl. Then the great lady Gāndhārī came out, and Kuntī, O victorious king, and all the king's women with their maids and retainers; and excitedly they stepped up on their platforms as the wives of the Gods ascend Mount Meru. And the whole fourfold society of brahmans, barons, and the others came hurriedly from the town and assembled to watch the weapons trials of the princes. There was a crowd there like an ocean, rippling in waves with the music that was played, and the people's curiosity.
>
> Then the teacher himself arrived with his son Aśvatthāman, dressed in white clothes and wearing a white brahmans' thread, anointed with white ointments,

white-haired, white-bearded; and he entered the middle of the arena, as the Moon enters with Mars the sky that is cleared of rain clouds. Mighty Droṇa made an offering such as suited the day, and had brahmans who knew the spells recite Vedic lines as a blessing. Then, as the sacred sounds that blessed the day subsided, men entered the arena carrying all kinds of weapons and gear.

Thereupon, the powerful bulls of the Bharatas descended with their bows, armor, and belts rightened, the quivers fast. Headed by Yudhiṣthira, the mighty princes from the eldest onward each gave a superb and marvelous exhibition of weaponry. Some of the spectators ducked their heads, afraid that the arrows might land on them, while others boldly kept looking, wonder-struck. They hit the targets with their arrows, which were marked with the name of each of them, all kinds of arrows, and nimbly let go while they drove past with horses. And watching that army of princes wield their bows and arrows, the crowds were astounded, as though they were watching a castle in the air. Their eyes wide with wonder, the men there wildly cheered them by the hundreds and thousands: 'Bravo! Bravo!' The powerful princes did their courses with the bow, over and again, on chariot, elephant, or horseback, and in hand-to-hand combat. Then they seized hold of their swords and shields and, brandishing their arms, ran through the courses of swordsmanship all over the terrain. The spectators watched the deftness, skill, flamboyance, balance, and firmness of grip of them all as they used their shields and swords.

Now Suyodhana [Duryodhana] and the Wolf-Belly [Bhīma] descended, as always in high spirits, clubs in hand, like two single-peaked mountains. The strong-armed princes buckled their armor, hell-bent on showing off their masculine prowess, like two huge rutting bull elephants joining battle over a cow. They circled each other, sunwise and widdershins, with their sparkling clubs, like two bulls in rut. Vidura described to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Kuntī to Gāndhārī, all the exploits of the princes.

Vaiśampāyana said:

When the Kuru prince and Bhīma, strong among the strong, had taken up their position in the arena, the crowd split into two factions, each partial to its own favorite. 'Hurray for the champion, the prince of the Kurus'! they shouted, or 'Hurray for Bhīma'! and the wildly rising cheers of the onlookers echoed widely.

The wise Droṇa Bhāradvāja looked at the arena that was like a stormy sea, and he said to Aśvatthāman, his beloved son, 'Stop those two champions, highly trained as they are, or else there will be a riot in the arena over Bhīma and Duryodhana!' The son of the guru halted the two as they raised their bludgeons like two violent seas that are whipped by the tempest of Doomsday.

Droṇa entered the court of the arena, stopped the music band that raised the din of a thundercloud, and began to speak: 'Now watch the Pārtha [Arjuna], the greatest of armsmen, son of Indra and the match of Indra's younger brother, whom I love more than my own son!' Thereupon the young man, whose happy entrance had been blessed by his teacher, entered with bow and full quiver, with wrist guard and finger guards tied on; and so, wearing a golden cuirass, Phalguna [Arjuna] made his appearance like a rain cloud with a golden sun, iridescent as the rainbow aglow with lightning, red like twilight. There was a huge commotion all over the arena, and the musical instruments and the conches exploded into sound. 'There is the magnificent son of Kuntī!' 'There goes the middlemost of the Pāṇḍavas!' 'There is the son of great Indra, the safeguard of the Kurus!' He is the greatest of armsmen, he is the greatest of the upholders of the Law, of morality, the supreme treasury of the wisdom of morals!' And when Kuntī heard these words beyond compare that the spectators voiced, her breasts became damp with tears that commingled with milk. His ears filled with the uproar, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the best of men, happily turned to Vidura and asked, 'Steward, what is that uproarious outcry like the roaring of a stormy sea that has suddenly risen from the arena as though to rend the skies?'

Vidura said:

Phalguna Pārtha has descended, great king, the son of Pāṇḍu, wearing his armor; and hence this commotion!

Dhṛtarāṣṭra said:

How lucky am I, and favoured am I, and protected am I, sage, by the fires of the Pāṇḍavas that were kindled from the block of Pṛthā!

Vaiśampāyana said:

When the rising theater had somehow calmed down, the Terrifier [Arjuna] began to exhibit the skill with weapons he had learned from his teacher. With the *āgneya* he created fire, with the *vāruṇa* water, with the *vāyavya* wind, with the *pārjanya* rain; with the *bhauma* he entered earth, with the *pārvata* he brought forth mountains. With the disappearing weapon he made it all vanish again. One instant he stood tall, the next squat, then was up in front on the chariot yoke, then again in the middle of the chariot, and the next instant had jumped to the ground. Trained to high excellence, the favorite of his guru hit and shot through fragile targets, and tiny ones, and hard ones, with different makes of arrows. While an iron boar was moved about, he loosed into its snout five continuous arrows as though they were one single one. The mighty archer buried twenty-one arrows in a cow's hollow horn that was swaying on a rope. And in this and other fashions he gave an exhibition of his dexterity with the long sword as well as the bow and the club.

When the tournament was almost over and the crowd had thinned and the music stopped, there came from the area of the gate the sound of arms being slapped, like the crash of a thunderbolt, which betokened greatness and prowess. 'Are the mountains rending? Is the earth caving in? Is the sky filling up with clouds that are heavy with rain?' Such, overlord of the earth, were the thoughts of the arena that instant. All the spectators looked toward the gate.

Droṇa, surrounded by the five Pāṇḍava brothers, shone like the moon in conjunction with the constellation of the Hand. The proud one hundred brothers,

joined by Aśvatthāman, surrounded Duryodhana, killer of his enemies, who had risen to his feet. And he, brandishing his club, encircled by the brothers who kept their weapons ready, stood there like the Sacker of Cities of olden times surrounded by the hosts of the Gods at the Slaughter of the Dānavas.

Vaiśampāyana said:

The people, eyes popping with wonder, made way, and Karṇa, victor of enemy cities, entered the spacious arena like a walking mountain, wearing his inborn armor and his face lit by his earrings, with his bow and tied-on sword—Karṇa, scourge of the hosts of his foes, of the wide fame and wide eyes, who had been born by Pṛthā as a maiden to the sting-rayed Sun, of whom he was a portion. His power and might were like the regal lion's or bull's or elephant's, and he was like sun, moon, and fire in brightness, beauty, and luster. Tall he stood, like a golden palm tree, this youth with the hard body of a lion. Innumerable were the virtues of this magnificent son of the Sun.

The strong-armed champion glanced about the circle of the stands; then, with none too great courtesy, bowed to Droṇa and Kṛpa. The entire crowd was hushed and stared at him, and a shudder went through the people as they wondered who he was. With a voice rumbling like a thunderhead, the eloquent brother, son of the Sun, spoke to his unrecognized brother, son of Pāka's Chastiser: 'Pārtha! Whatever feat you have done, I shall better it before the eyes of all these people. Don't be too amazed at yourself!'

He had not finished speaking, eloquent king, when the people all about rose like one man, like a pitcher heaved from the well. Pleasure flooded Duryodhana, O tiger among men, and abasement and anger pervaded the Terrifier instantly. Droṇa gave his permission, and the powerful, pugnacious Karṇa accomplished every feat that the Pārtha had achieved. Whereupon Duryodhana and his brothers embraced Karṇa; and he joyously said to him, 'Welcome, strong-armed hero! Good fortune has brought you here, you who know how to humble pride. Take your pleasure of me and the kingdom of the Kurus!'

Karṇa said:

Then enough of everything else! I choose to be friends with you. And I want a duel with the Pārtha, Bhārata!

Duryodhana said:

Enjoy all pleasures with me, show your friends your favour, and set your foot on the heads of your ill-wishers, scourge of your foes!

Vaiśampāyana said:

But the Pārtha thought himself insulted, and he said to Karṇa, who stood like a mountain in the midst of the crowd of his brethren, 'The worlds that are set aside for uninvited intruders, and for uninvited prattlers, those worlds you shall attain, Karṇa, when I have done killing you!'

Karṇa said:

The stage is open to all, so what of you, Phalguna? Barons are those who are the strongest. Law obeys might. Why abuse, which is the whimpering of the weak? Talk with arrows, Bhārata, until before your teacher's own eyes I carry off your head with mine!

Vaiśampāyana said:

Droṇa gave his permission, and the Pārtha, sacker of enemy cities, was embraced by his brothers and rushed to the other to fight. Duryodhana and his brothers clasped Karṇa, and he stood there ready for battle, holding his bow and arrows.

Then the sky became overcast with lightning-streaked, thunderous, rainbow-attended clouds that laughed with lines of cranes. And seeing how Indra of the golden horses fondly looked down upon the stage, the Sun carried off the clouds that came too close. Now the Pāṇḍava could be half seen, hidden by the shadow of the clouds, and Karṇa appeared in a nimbus of bright sunlight. The sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra stood by Karṇa; and Droṇa Bhāradvāja, Kṛpa, and Bhīṣma stood by the Pārtha.

The arena was divided, the women took their sides; but Kuntibhoja's daughter, who knew the issue, fell in a faint. Vidura, who knew all the Laws, brought the fainting woman back to consciousness by splashing her with water in which sandalwood had been sprinkled. When her breath had returned, she stared at her two sons, clad in their armor; but however much grieved, she did not interfere.

As the two champions raised their large bows, Śāradvata said to them, for he was experienced in the conduct of duels and knew all the Laws, 'This is the youngest son of Pāṇḍu born from Pṛthā, a scion of Kuru, who will engage in a duel with you, sir. You too must now tell the names of your mother, your father, and your lineage, and of the barons whose scion you are. When he has learned them, the Pārtha shall fight you, or mayhap not.'

At his words Karṇa hung his head in shame, and his face faded like a lotus that has been showered by the rains.

Duryodhana said:

Master, in the scriptures it is ruled that there are three ways for one to be a king: to be born one, to become a champion, or to lead an army. If Phalguna refuses to fight with anyone who is not a king then I shall anoint him to the kingdom in the country of the Angas!

Vaiśampāyana said:

That very instant the warlike Karṇa was consecrated by Vedic brahmans with roasted rice grains, flowers in golden pitchers, and enthroned on a golden stool, to rule the kingdom of Anga; and the mighty hero was endowed with fortune. He received a royal umbrella and a yak-tail fan; and when the wishes for victory had died down the bull-like king said to King Kaurava [Duryodhana], 'What can I give that matches this gift of a kingdom? Tell me, tiger among kings, and I shall

do it so, my liege!' 'I want our eternal friendship!' replied Suyodhana. And upon his word Karṇa answered, 'So shall it be!' Joyously the two embraced and became greatly happy.

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

Then, his upper cloth awry, sweating and trembling, Adhiratha entered the stage, swaying on his feet, held up by a stick. When Karṇa saw him, he let go of his bow and moved by his reverence for his father he greeted him with his head, which was still wet with the water of the consecration. Nervously, the chariot driver covered his feet with the end of his *dhoti* and said to Karṇa, who was crowned with success, 'Ah, my son'! Trembling with love, he embraced him and kissed his head, and with his tears he once more sprinkled the head that was still damp from the consecration to the Anga kingdom.

When Bhīmasena Pāṇḍava saw Adhiratha, he decided that Karṇa was the *sūta's* son and burst out laughing. 'Son of a *sūta*,' he said, 'you do not have the right to die in a fight with a Pārtha! You better stick to the whip that suits your family. You have no right to enjoy the Anga kingdom, churl, no more than a dog has a right to eat the cake by the fire at a sacrifice!' At these words a slight tremor started in Karṇa's lower lip, and he sighed and looked up to the sun in the sky. But Duryodhana leaped up from amidst his brothers, like a rutting elephant from a lotus pond, and he said to Bhīmasena of terrible deeds, who stood his ground, 'Wolf-Belly, you have no right to speak such words! Might is the father of barons, and even the least of barons deserves a fight. The origin of both barons and rivers are surely obscure. Fire that pervades all creatures springs from water. The thunderbolt that slew the Dānavas was made from a bone of Dadhīca. The blessed lord God Guha is a complete mystery: he is said to be the son of Fire, or the Pleiads, or Rudra, or the Ganges. Men born from baronesses are known to have become brahmans. Our teacher was born from a trough, Master Kṛpa from a reed stalk. And the princes all know how you yourselves were born. How could a doe give birth to this tiger who resembles the sun, with his earrings and armor and celestial birthmarks? This lordly man deserves to rule the world, not just Anga! He deserves it by the power of his arms and by me who shall obey his orders. Or else, if there be a man who will not condone my action, let him, on chariot or on foot, bend the bow!'

There was a great uproar in the entire arena, mixed with cheers; then the sun went down. Duryodhana, holding Karṇa by the hand, his way lighted by the flames of torches, left the arena. The Pāṇḍavas, Droṇa, Kṛpa and Bhīṣma, O lord of the people, all went to their own dwellings. The people departed, some hailing 'Arjuna!' others 'Karṇa!' others again 'Duryodhana!' And when she had recognized the king of Anga by his birthmarks as her own son, Kuntī's hidden pleasure grew with love. Duryodhana's fear of Arjuna also diminished rapidly when he had found Karṇa, O king of the earth. That hero himself, who had mastered the labour of weaponry, flattered Duryodhana with the most coaxing words. And at that time even Yudhiṣṭhira thought that no archer on earth was Karṇa's equal.

The entire scene, where Droṇa is displaying the martial skills of his young disciples to the Kaurava assembly, foreshadows the later war. As the young men arrive, buckled in armour, showing off their prowess, Vidura describes it all to blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Kuntī to blindfolded Gāndhārī: as, later, Sañjaya describes the war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The old father's blindness is always kept in view.

All the parents and parent-figures are present here: the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the heroic but ineffective Droṇa and Bhīṣma, Kuntī, the mother of both Arjuna and Karṇa (who become sworn enemies before her very eyes, in this scene), and then, as a late arrival, the charioteer and foster-father of Karṇa, and also the true fathers of the two young antagonists, the Sun-God and the Rain-God. These onlooking presences enlarge the scene from earth to heaven, deepen the present with the ironic poignancies of the ever-active past (like the heroes' births).

Protagonist and antagonist are matched for life beginning with this scene: Bhīma and Duryodhana, Arjuna and Karṇa. And their fortunes oscillate. This oscillation is dramatic in the case of Karṇa's rising and falling fortunes in the course of this one scene—which is paradigmatic of all of his life. These oscillations are echoed not only in the shouts of the crowd but in the heart of Kuntī who alone knows the identity of Karṇa. When she hears the shouts of praise for her Arjuna, 'her breasts became damp with tears that commingled with milk.' When Karṇa gets ready for battle with Arjuna, Kuntī, 'who knew the issue, fell in a faint.' 'When her breath had returned, she stared at her two sons, clad in armour, but, however much grieved, she did not interfere.' But we know that before the very last battle of Arjuna and Karṇa, she, who has held her secret in silence till then, does interfere. By revealing herself and his identity then to Karṇa, she brings him inevitably closer to his defeat and death.

To return to the contest: we begin by seeing Arjuna display his skills, his mastery over the elements, fire, water, winds, rain, earth; he shoots with different kinds of arrows fragile targets, tiny ones, hard ones, and shoots five arrows into the mouth of a moving iron boar. These feats have many resonances but I'll pick out only one. Arjuna shoots five arrows here exactly as he does later when he wins Draupadī—it's as if he is not alone in these acts but he is all five brothers.

Just as he finishes his display, we hear the sound of arms being slapped, 'like the crash of a thunderbolt', and Karṇa enters. The attention

of the spectators shifts to Karṇa. His beauty and prowess and sun-like lustre are fully described. He challenges Arjuna and calls him Pārtha, son of Pṛthā or Kuntī—without knowing that he, Karṇa, is also a Pārtha, son of Pṛthā.[2]

When he challenges Arjuna, the crowd rises 'like a pitcher heaved from the well'. Pleasure floods Duryodhana who offers Karṇa friendship—one that lasts throughout the epic. When Arjuna and Karṇa are about to begin the contest, 'the Sun carried off the clouds that came too close', reminding us of the divine fathers. Arjuna is 'hidden by the shadow of the clouds', and Karṇa appears 'in a nimbus of bright sunlight'. The arena is divided, the women take sides.

It's then that Karṇa is asked to name his father and mother. He hangs his head in shame (Arjuna is called Pārtha again here), and his face fades 'like a lotus showered by the rains', suggesting the rivalry of the parent gods, sun (friend to lotuses) and rain.

Duryodhana quickly interferes, instantly crowns Karṇa a king with royal insignia, raising him up again. At the height of this good turn enters an old man, swaying on his feet, held up by a stick, Karṇa's lowborn (foster-) father, moved by his son's good fortune, his tears mixing with the water of his son's consecration. Now Bhīma calls him the son of a chariot-driver and shames him further. Throughout, there is also a rivalry of explanations—what qualifies a man, might or birth? Here too the argument vacillates and is inconclusive, like the contest itself. The crowd itself is divided in its opinions and it cheers for Arjuna now and for Karṇa again. Kuntī too oscillates from grief to hidden love and pleasure as she recognises Karṇa, now king of Aṅga, by his birthmarks.

Such oscillation of fortune, outcomes, rights and wrongs, and emotions within characters is characteristic of this epic's movements, enacted even in the texture.[3]

V

The dubeity and oscillation of fortunes, outcomes and emotions are fully matched by the legal or legalistic ambiguities, arguments and counter-arguments that precede and succeed *every* major act—Karṇa's rights in the above passage, Kṛṣṇa's rights to receive the first honours at the sacrifice, arguments regarding whether five brothers could marry one woman, the rightness of the dicing game, whether Draupadī could be rightfully wagered, whether Arjuna came out of the life to be lived incognito before the contracted thirteenth year, and so on. It is not *dharma* or right conduct

that the *Mahābhārata* seems to teach, but the *sūkṣma* or subtle nature of *dharma*—its infinite subtlety, its incalculable calculus of consequences, its endless delicacy. Because *dharma-sūkṣmatā* is one of the central themes that recur in an endless number of ways, the many legal discussions are a necessary part of the action.

Related to this ambiguity is the ineradicable mixture of good and evil in each of the main characters. The Pāṇḍavas, with Kṛṣṇa, who are 'the good guys', manage to kill every Kaurava hero, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Duryodhana, by foul means. And the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana and Karṇa, are not just villains, but heroic and honest warriors despite everything. Neither is ever underestimated or underdescribed. Also, the major Pāṇḍava heroes are tested and found wanting in the one virtue around which their ego, their character and their great fame are built. Yudhiṣthira, famed for his truth-telling, tells a lie to kill Droṇa and is at once taken down several notches—this virtuous man's chariot, which always moved inches above the ground, now has to come down to earth and run on it like any other defective mortal's. Arjuna, the greatest and best equipped of warriors, loses nerve and morale in the first moment of battle.[4]

Yet amid all these doubts, arguments and ambiguities, one thing is certain—everyone's destruction. Through all the oscillations, there is a single unrelenting direction—the destruction of the Kuru race. The pervasive ambiguity here is not a structural uncertainty. In the short range, what seems doubtful in outcome, in the long range leaves no doubt at all about the outcome—which is neither winning or losing, but nothing less than total destruction. Both Draupadī and Gāndhārī, the two queens on opposite sides, are left childless.

Part of this relentlessness is the way pairs of enemies grow up together or apart: Bhīṣma and Śikhaṇḍin, Droṇa and Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Bhīma and Duryodhana, Arjuna and Karṇa. Vows and weapons gather towards the moments of battle. And as Arjuna gathers weapons from Śiva and others, Karṇa too gathers them. But the latter also gathers curses and forfeits, all because he does not know who he is, i.e., a Kṣatriya as well-born as Arjuna. When he finally comes to know who he is, he is denuded further by his promises to Kuntī. In fact, his tragedy is not caused by a 'fatal flaw' but a fatal virtue—his generosity that makes him give away the armour and earrings of immortality to Indra, his rival's divine father, and that makes him promise Kuntī that he would kill none of the Pāṇḍavas but only Arjuna and that he would not use the same weapon twice.

With each day of the war, there is a further decimation until Aśvatthāmā kills all the Pāṇḍava children with his ultimate weapon, a burning arrow that cannot be withdrawn, which reaches into the wombs of the Pāṇḍava women to kill their foetuses (a terrifying prophecy of the nuclear threat, as Peter Brook sees it), while Kṛṣṇa hides the Pāṇḍavas. Only one foetus in Uttarā (wife of Abhimanyu) is revived from still-birth, leaving the Pāṇḍavas one lone descendent. He is Parīkṣit, who by his discourtesy to a sage, earns a curse, and is killed by a snake. So his son vows vengeance and performs a sacrifice for the universal destruction of serpents—during which the text comes full circle, for the *Mahābhārata* itself gets told to this grandson, sole survivor. And the epic begins with the snake sacrifice.

VI

It's time to step back and sum up the conception of action in the epic and how the replications are part of a total world-view.

1. The relentless march of each character towards his death is accompanied by the suggestion of infinite regress in motivation, often into previous lives. Yet, what's presented in 'close-up' and in dramatic terms is the present life.

Sage Vasiṣṭha has cursed the divine Vasu brothers to be born as mortals and suffer the thousand ills that such flesh is heir to, Gaṅgā saves the first seven from mortal lives by drowning them at birth. But the eighth drowning is interrupted by Śantanu who knows nothing of the curse and the release that Gaṅgā is attempting. He saves the eighth child *for* mortal strife, and he is Bhīṣma. Then the central act of Bhīṣma's life, his vow of celibacy, uncoils the rest of the action, including his refusal to marry Ambā, who vows vengeance and commits suicide to be reborn as Śikhaṇḍin, who alone can face and kill Bhīṣma. Thus a prenatal curse and an early noble deed together fire the life that leads relentlessly to war and death.

2. Many characters undergo similar experiences, as we have seen, for example, in the kinship diagram with its repetitious patterns (e.g., Satyavatī and Kuntī) in relations, settings, acts, etc., or in the inset tales like the Nala story wherein what happened to Yudhiṣṭhira (dice game, loss of kingdom, exile) happens also to Nala.

3. Thus the experiences are not bound to one character. It's as if action is released from character. Furthermore, the same man undergoes an experience more than once—e.g., living incognito, or engaging in the dice game, almost rehearsing it once and playing it for real a second or third time—like a neurotic's compulsions to repeat, or certain 'autonomous complexes'. It's as if there's a kind of autonomy of action. Once set into motion, the act chooses its personae, constitutes its agents.

4. Characters usually know what they are doing and still do it. Counsellors advise Yudhiṣṭhira against the dice game, giving him reasons, quoting texts. But he still accepts the invitation to the game. The Pāṇḍavas are told that Draupadī is born out of a sacrifice chiefly to wipe out the Kuru race, but then they still marry her.

5. No action goes unrecorded, unjudged, unexpiated—whatever be the motives or the total character of the person. Bhīṣma, for his own good reasons, rejects Ambā's offer of marriage and so must die at her hands. Yudhiṣṭhira yields to casuistry and tells a single lie. So he must visit hell at least briefly. No action is withdrawn from consequence. Kuntī's early indiscretion, by which she gives birth to Karṇa and abandons him, dogs her and Karṇa. Even Kṛṣṇa dies of Gāndhārī's curse that he be killed by a lowborn hunter in an unknown place.

6. Not only action, not even a passion in the mind can pass unpurged or fade without expression and consequence in the world outside the self. Action, once it begins in thought and feeling cannot be repressed. (Hence, Patañjali's *yoga* aphorism: *Yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ* '*Yoga* is the stilling of the waves of the mind'). That's why when Dhṛtarāṣṭra is angry with Bhīma and embraces him, Kṛṣṇa pushes an iron image into the blind old king's embrace. Dhṛtarāṣṭra crushes the effigy in an upsurge of repressed anger and that expressive vengeful act purges him of his grief and rage. Gāndhārī's anger too must find expression: as her sight (through the blindfold) lights on Yudhiṣṭhira's toes they begin to smoulder and burn. And she curses Kṛṣṇa with an obscure and ignoble death. As the passions already are a form of action with consequences, mere self-control is not enough: they should not arise at all: hence Patañjali's second aphorism quoted above. The *Gītā's* ideal man is therefore a *sthitaprajña* 'the man with the steadied mind'; ideal action is *niṣkāmakarma* 'the act without desire'. For once the passions come into being, they issue in actions. They'll get themselves enacted. So, says the *Gītā*, act without thought of results or attachment.

7. Hence, the Western dramaturgic notions of action issuing from character, character transformed by action in some direct way, do not fit here. Characters do not change here. The usual kind of expectation of character change, of growth and maturation, is disappointed. Arjuna, after the obviously mind-blowing experience of the *Gītā* and the vision of the Cosmic Kṛṣṇa, does not become a different man. He gains just

enough perspective to return to battle and to remain himself. The only change in a character usually is one of knowledge, a shift from ignorance to knowledge. Uttara sees Arjuna in his true form, but does not lose his natural cowardice. Arjuna sees the true form of Kṛṣṇa and is restored to the action that is true to his 'nature' (*svabhāva*).

8. Furthermore, thanks to the replications, patterns of action are not confined to single characters: similar things happen to Satyavatī and Kuntī, to Yudhiṣṭhira and Nala, in the past and in the present. Thus the notion of 'character' as something finite (etymologically 'engraved', 'fixed') crumbles as it opens into other lives and partakes of their patterns.

9. The chain of causation, central to the notion of *karma*, is structured so that one undergoes the same experience one has caused. If Māṇḍavya thrusts a blade of grass into a fly as a child, later he is impaled on a stake. Pāṇḍu kills a sage engaged in in a sexual act, so he dies in the act of sex. The structure repeats itself, except that the subject (Pāṇḍu) of the first act becomes the object in the second. Curses, boons, and the consequences of past acts cannot be withdrawn—they have an autonomy independent of character. Action thus becomes prior to actors. Knowledge of precedent and legal advice do not prevent disastrous action—Yudhiṣṭhira gambles after hearing all the arguments against dice as a breeder of disputes. And the Pāṇḍavas marry Draupadī after learning that she has been born out of a sacrifice to root out the Kauravas.

VII

In view of this way of thinking, the cast of characters can be divided into watchers and actors: Vidura (the god of Dharma reborn in a servant-maid's womb) and Vyāsa, the ancestor of all and the watcher/narrator of the whole epic, and Sañjaya in the battle scenes, watch all the action. Bhīṣma and Droṇa, after their initial actions, interfere very little—they can only watch the inexorable unrolling of events. Such watching and witnessing is part of the silence and failure of the elders in catastrophic scenes like the dice-game or the disrobing of Draupadī. The entire cast of dramatis personae seems to illustrate the ancient conception that the self has two aspects, a watching one (*sākṣin*) and an active one:

Two birds, twin images
in plumage,
friends, ever inseparable,
cling to a tree

One eats the fruit,
eats of the sweet and eats
of the bitter,
while the other watches,
watches without eating.

Buried in the bole
of the self-same tree
one suffers, engulfed
in his impotence.

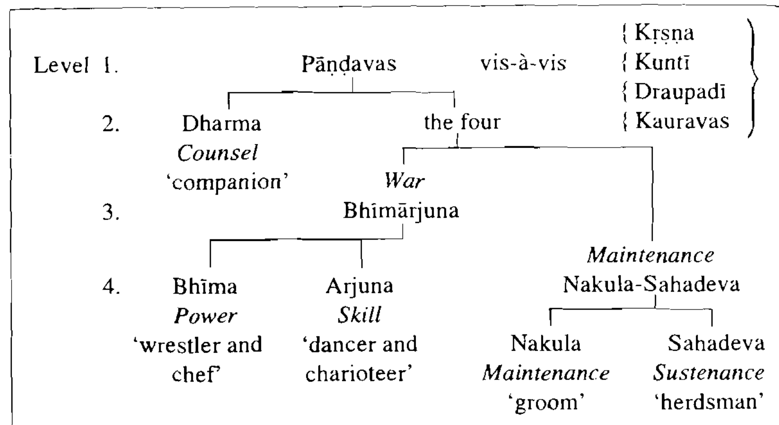
Yet as he watches the watching
bird, the adorable one, and sees
the sweet bitter glory
as His alone,
he rises, free
from grief.

freely rendered from *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, *muṇḍaka* 3, *khaṇḍa* 1

We said earlier that characters were not quite 'fixed' or 'finite', as they are open to past lives as well as other lives around them. In another way too their status as characters is changeable: they tend to act as individuals sometimes, as representing classes and values at others, and at other times as part of one composite unit. Others (e.g., Goldman 1980) have noticed the composite character of Indian heroes like Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. In this epic, the Pāṇḍavas act as one person vis-à-vis Kuntī, Draupadī and the Kaurava cousins. As noticed earlier, both in the early exhibition of skills and in winning Draupadī, Arjuna shoots five arrows into the target. He represents all five as warriors in the first instance and as suitors to Draupadī. The *Mahābhārata* says that Yudhiṣṭhira was the root and his brothers the branches of one tree. At another level, Yudhiṣṭhira, centrally concerned with ethical issues, stands for brahmanical values and the others for the Kṣatriya. Bhīma accuses him more than once of acting like a brahman, not a kṣatriya. This pair is the focus of a central division and conflict in classical Indian society. Bhīma and Arjuna, frequently mentioned together as Bhīmārjuna, are clearly warriors. Bhīma is further distinguished by his physical power and Arjuna by his art and skill. Nakula/Sahadeva, the twins, are the 'maintenance' men, like the vaiśyas. As Dumézil points out, here is an Indo-European tri-partite society. Their true natures are hinted at when they choose their disguises in Virāṭa's court: Yudhiṣṭhira as a brahman counsellor; Bhīma as wrestler and chef (he's also known for his enormous appetite and called Wolf-Belly,

vṛkodara); Arjuna as an artful dancer and later as a charioteer; Nakula as a caretaker of horses and Sahadeva as a herdsman of cows. As Oscar Wilde says, 'Give a man a mask, he will tell you the truth.'

The five heroes are also individuated by the poet (especially the first three) by separate episodes for each—eg., Yudhiṣṭhira's dice-game, Bhīma's romance with the demoness Hidimbā, Arjuna's romance with Ulūpī and Urvaśī, and his special relation with Kṛṣṇa. They also have special foibles, as revealed in their deaths. These various relations at different levels may be summed up in the following diagram.



Level 1. Unity of the five Pāṇḍavas
2. *Dharma* vs. *Karma*
3. Tripartite (Indo-European, *à la* Dumezil)
4. The five heroes individuated by the poet

VIII

While I was contemplating the form of the *Mahābhārata*, I happened to browse in the section on crystallography in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I found that the following sentences offered apt analogies for what I've been talking about.

> All crystals have at least this kind of order, which can be described as a periodic repetition of their atomic chemical motif by translations. [. . .] Repetition can be defined by translation, rotation, and reflection . . . or combinations of these simple devices.

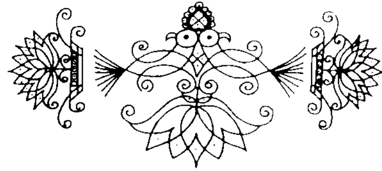
On the *Mahābhāratas* in different languages, appearing in different sizes:

> When a crystal is placed in contact with a solvent, it dissolves in such a way as to be consistent with its symmetry.

Crystallographers also speak of crystal growth in steps wherever there is a 'dislocation', which makes for both order and growth, an open-ended system. When one compares the many *Mahābhāratas* or other works based on the epics, the way new incidents are added only in certain places where there seems to be a need for them, one thinks of such an analogy with crystal growth. Of the scores of instances, I shall cite only one. The way Yudhiṣṭhira loses everything in dice seems to many readers a little incredible. Others (like van Buitenen) have offered ingenious, somewhat extra-textual explanations of why the dice-game was necessary—e.g., it is because it was part of the Rājasūya sacrifice, the sacrifice that Yudhiṣṭhira performs. There are other good reasons given in the Sanskrit text: for one, Śakuni says, 'Invite Yudhiṣṭhira to a dice game. He loves to play dice but doesn't know how.' Lest there should still be any doubt regarding the absolute certainty of Śakuni's victory, both later and folk-*Mahābhāratas* tell a story about Śakuni's past. Śakuni and his brothers were once cruelly imprisoned by Vicitravīrya in the generation before Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Part of the cruelty consisted of giving all six brothers only one plate of food, just enough to feed only one, each day. As they were all starving, tantalised by these morsels, they decided to give it to the cleverest of them, so that he could survive and take revenge. The test: to thread a bone without a needle. Śakuni, clever Śakuni, threads it by tying a thread to an ant and baiting it with a grain of rice. So the brothers give Śakuni the daily plate and starve to death. Śakuni makes dice out of his dead brothers' bones and waits for a chance to take revenge against the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. The dead men's anger in the dice makes sure that Yudhiṣṭhira will win at no throw and will lose kingdom, brothers and himself, and lead to a total war of destruction. Such a story adds one more past and one more motive to the action. That's a characteristic 'growth step' for the *Mahābhārata*:

> Surprisingly, many of the most important properties of the crystal are one of the few odd places in which the crystal goes wrong. Many crystals could not have grown at all without having imperfections in them.

Classics Lost and Found



Just as our biological past lives in the physical body, our social and cultural past lives in the many cultural bodies we inherit—our languages, arts, religions, and life-cycle rites. In this short paper I wish to talk about some of the relations between the past and the present in India, especially through literature, and about the ways the present and the past transform one another, of which discovery is only one.

I shall begin with two anecdotes of fieldwork as parables for the kinds of changes that occur, then describe the way certain Tamil classics were (re)discovered in the nineteenth century, and end with an example of how a modern poet makes use of his traditions.

A friend of mine, a student of American Indian languages, had made it his business to preserve those that were dying. One of the languages had only a single speaker left, a poor, very old, very toothless but spirited woman. My friend found some money for his fieldwork, brought the woman to the University of California in Los Angeles where he worked, and anxiously began recording her, studying her language syllable by syllable, consonant by consonant, for months. He paid her a small fee every week and she saved it carefully. She had for years dreamed of getting herself some dentures, and now that she had the money, she went and bought a full set of teeth. And as soon as she did so, a whole new set of dental consonants emerged in the language. The sound structure of the language appeared now in a new light. It was like restoring a painting. The past, like other cultural constructions, changes as we attend to it.

The second anecdote shows, in a somewhat different way, that the observer, the discoverer, the historian or the collector soon becomes a part of what he works with. Murray Emeneau, the eminent American linguist, studied the language and collected the songs of the Todas, a pastoral tribe in the Nilgiri Hills in south India, in the early 1950s

(Emeneau 1971). When he visited the tribe again a few years later to continue his work with them, to his great surprise they sang to him new songs about a white man who had collected songs among them several years earlier. He had created a tradition by studying it.

The past is another country, as the saying goes. With the past, too, one adds oneself to it as one studies it. One is changed by it and the past itself is changed by one's study of it.

Sometimes a piece of the past comes alive in the present, becomes relevant, even seditious, because it seems to provide powerful instances for something forbidden or censored in the present. *Hamlet* in Poland (see Jan Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*), or Shakespeare's own history plays in Elizabethan England, dramatising problems and fears of succession; or the film *Ivan the Terrible* in Russia; or the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* all over India (and outside, in Indonesia, Thailand, etc.), conveying political messages; and in contemporary India Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play *Gāśirām Kotwāl*, or Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* in Kannada—all are instances of artists using episodes from past history to comment on the present. They give new meanings to the past in the present.

I myself got a glimpse of how immediate and dangerous the past could be when I visited northern Sri Lanka in 1983, just after the troubles between the Tamils and the Sinhalese majority had erupted.

I was speaking to a Tamil audience innocently about classical Tamil poetry. When I came to talk about the old war poems, especially the elegies on dead warriors, I choked on them. I couldn't read them to the Tamil audience in Jaffna. Several Tamil insurgents had been killed in the region recently, and I remembered suddenly in the middle of this somewhat academic presentation that they had been adolescents, their beards still soft, like the young warrior in this ancient poem:

O heart
sorrowing
for this lad

once scared of a stick
lifted in mock anger
when he refused
a drink of milk.

        now
not content with killing
war elephants
with spotted trunks.

this son
of the strong man who fell yesterday

seems unaware of the arrow
in his wound,

his head of hair is plumed
like a horse's,

he has fallen
on his shield,

his beard is still soft.
(Ramanujan 1985, 165)

One of over two thousand poems composed by five hundred poets collected in eight anthologies about two millennia ago, this could have been written (with some changes in detail) yesterday. In a culture like the Indian, the past does not pass. It keeps on providing paradigms and ironies for the present, or at least that's the way it seems.

The classical Tamil tradition, such as the poem above represents, was not always known to the Tamils themselves, or actively present to them. In the eighteenth century, Hindu scholars, devout worshippers of Śiva and Viṣṇu, did not wish to read so-called non-religious poems and would not teach them to their pupils. The epics *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai* were non-Hindu; the latter was clearly Buddhist. So, even the finest Tamil scholars of the time ignored these breathtaking epics and the anthologies of early Tamil; most didn't even suspect their existence and gave their nights and days to religious and grammatical texts, many of which were of minor importance.

The story of the rediscovery of these great classical texts in the nineteenth century is a dramatic one. Even the factual account sounds like a parable and works like a paradigm for the way 'a great tradition modernises.'[1]

The name of U.V. Cāmināta Aiyar (1855–1942) became a legend in his own lifetime among students of Tamil.[2] A young man of vast learning, he met, almost by chance, a liberal-minded *munsif* (civil judge), Ramasami Mudaliyar, in a temple town called Kumbakonam. In his autobiography, Aiyar recalls that day as a Thursday, the 21st of October 1880, and dedicates a whole chapter to this fateful meeting, for it was no less, for him and for Tamil culture.[3]

The *munsif*, who had just been transferred to the small town, asked Aiyar what he had studied and under whom. Aiyar mentioned his well-known mentor and listed all the grammars and religious texts and

purāṇas and commentaries he had laboured over and learnt by heart. The judge was not impressed. 'Is that all? What is the use? Have you studied the old texts?' He mentioned some. Aiyar, one of the most erudite and thoroughgoing of Tamil scholars, had never heard of them.

The judge later brought out a handwritten copy of an old poem and asked Aiyar to take it home. The judge told him how he had long ago studied a small part of it in a textbook compiled by a Eurasian of English descent, Rev. Henry Bower, and he could not now make much sense of the whole text. The English language, English-educated Indians like Mudaliyar, and English people are important forces in the discovery of the Indian past. Indology is an invention and gift of Western scholarship, an ambiguous gift according to some (see Said 1978).

Aiyar was confident he could read anything in the Tamil of any period. Yet he found that, with all his learning, he could not understand much of the manuscript. It was a lesson in humility. He knew the words but they seemed to mean something he couldn't guess at. He didn't know the stories. Familiar names referred to unfamiliar characters. He read what he could to the judge, and they struggled with it together for six months. He had by now gathered that it was not a Hindu text at all, but a Jain text, the *Civakacintāmaṇi*, and he began to make inquiries about it.

A friend told him one day that there was a Jain community a few streets away from where Aiyar lived. Why not go there and find out whether anyone in that community knew the text? So they went to visit a rich and influential Jain gentleman. Even as they entered the house, Aiyar noticed mango leaves and decorations on the door frame, signs of a happy ritual occasion. He asked the gentleman, 'Did you have a special feast or holiday today?' The Jain gentleman replied, 'No, sir, we were reading this sacred text, the *Civakacintāmaṇi*, for the past six months with our teacher. We finished it today. So we are celebrating the end of our reading with a happy ceremony.' This entire community knew the text that Aiyar had been labouring over for months. They revered it and lovingly studied it as their forebears had done in earlier times.

Such incidents brought home to Aiyar, as they bring home to us, that Indian tradition is not a single street or a one-way street but consists of many connected streets and neighbourhoods like that town itself. Interlocking and coexistent though they are, people of one neighbourhood may never have stepped into another. India does not have one past, but many pasts.

Aiyar's little excursion into this fascinating, ever-available but never-entered neighbourhood was an eye-opener. He now recognised what he didn't know, even after years of studying with great Tamil teachers,

going from *guru* to *guru* in search of classics. He decided to master the Jain text, edit it and publish it, even though he didn't belong to the Jain community. He travelled in his spare time seeking copies of the text and found twenty-three of them, four of which were complete. By working on this text and collating the copies, solving the puzzles they set, he taught himself to become a superb editor and commentator, one of the first of his kind. While he was engaged in this self-education and cultural discovery, everything was grist for his mill. For instance, he once saw an English Bible in an acquaintance's home, and, leafing through it (he didn't have enough English to read it), he learned of the concept of concordances, which he used creatively in all his later work.

Aiyar also discovered to his astonishment that once before, in the sixteenth century, another brahman scholar had done something very similar. As Aiyar began to look into the commentaries, he found two works by Naccinarkkiniyar, the first skimpy, and the second full and detailed. When he asked his new-found Jain friends about them, they told him the legend they all knew, one that must have seemed like reverse *déjà vu* to Aiyar. Naccinarkkiniyar had first written a commentary on the *Civakacintāmaṇi* on his own, but the Jains of the time had said in response to it, 'You don't understand a thing about this text or the Jain tradition.' He had taken their criticism to heart, gone to a Jain village and passed himself off as a Jain, to do fieldwork as anthropologists do these days. After a period of this kind of learning, he wrote a new commentary, full of well-earned detail.

Now the text had to be rediscovered again in the nineteenth century and seen in a new light by Aiyar. There is a mythic precedent for this process, too: the Vedas were stolen by a demon and carried off into the ocean, and Lord Viṣṇu himself had to take on the avatar of a boar, enter the ocean, destroy this demon—the demon of Time, truly—and retrieve the Vedas.[4]

Naccinarkkiniyar's commentary on the *Civakacintāmaṇi* quoted several texts and authors for whom he gave no names, and this made Aiyar realise that there were many more classical Tamil texts to be found. He devoted the rest of his long life to roaming the villages, rummaging in private attics and the storerooms of monasteries, unearthing, editing and printing them. In fact, soon after he had discovered the *Civakacintāmaṇi*, he returned to the monastery where he had studied for years, and he discovered there a second copy complete with commentary; it had been hand-copied carefully by his own teacher, Mināksisundaram Pillai, who had never mentioned it to his prize pupil. He also found a neglected

bundle of palm-leaf manuscripts in a corner, thrown together in a basket, and they were the Eight Anthologies of classical Tamil, from which I have quoted above the elegy on the young warrior.

When texts were no longer rare manuscripts that were physically owned by certain people but were copied from palm-leaf manuscripts onto paper, and especially when they were put into print, the relationships between authors and audiences were revolutionised. There is of course much more to say about the sociology of knowledge than this—and I have done so elsewhere (Ramanujan 1985).

Because of the lifework of scholars like Aiyar and his contemporaries, the 'Tamil Renaissance' became possible and a 'great tradition' was 'modernised'.[5] But modernity, itself a new attitude to history and tradition, with a new kind of pride in the past, also discovers and includes the Indian past, through new techniques of discovery and through a juxtaposition of 'the pastness of the past' and its 'presence'. As Denis Hudson observes, '[Madras] city's most modern institutions use symbols of Tamil Nadu's most ancient past [especially literary ones]. Maxims from a Tamil text on ethics of the fifth or sixth century are painted near the driver's seat of public buses. A statue of the heroine of a fifth century epic stands on the throughfare on Marina Beach near the University of Madras. Poems of ancient Tamil bards are standard subjects of college syllabi. The names of kings and heroes of the classical literature are the names of contemporary politicians' (Hudson 1981).

Translators like George Hart and I, almost a century after Aiyar's fateful meeting with the *munsif*, are now reading and translating the Tamil classics (Ramanujan 1967, 1985; Hart 1980). The word *translate*, as you know, is only Latin for the Greek word *metaphor*. Both mean 'carry across'.

People usually praise translators for their labour of love. I must say, though, that one translates not just out of love but also out of envy of the past masters, in order to appropriate and repossess the wonderful classical poems—and, of course, ultimately to publish them in one's own name. A medieval Sanskrit epigram about the past says, 'If you have not read the ancients, how can you write? If you *have* read the ancients, why do you write?' One cuts through that dilemma by translating the past. Translation then participates in our dream of making out of a historical past a contemporary past, creating out of the so-called linear sequential order of history a simultaneous order, an active presence.

One of the early texts Aiyar edited was a poem of about the sixth

century, the first long devotional or *bhakti* poem to appear in any Indian language, the first religious text to appear in any native tongue—until then, religious texts had been composed only in Sanskrit. The text was *Tirumurukārṟuppaṭai*, a 'Guide to Lord Murugan'. It tells where to go and how to find Murugan, an ancient Dravidian god with six faces, twelve eyes, and twelve hands, a Dionysian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, love, war, and travel. He is worshipped in six famous hilltop shrines in Tamil Nadu; the poem, too, has six parts, as the devotee's human body has six *cakras* or vital centres. The poem, the country with its six shrines, the god of six faces, and the devotee's body all correspond to (or with) one another.

The very day Aiyar finished editing this poem and closed the books, as it were, he saw, right outside his window, a devotee of Murugan with a *kāvaḍi*, a bamboo frame with peacock feathers that his worshippers carry on their heads. The devotee was singing a section of this sixth-century poem, *Tirumurukārṟuppaṭai*. Aiyar says he felt blessed by that good omen. In this instance, and in other realms as well, the past the scholar was just discovering was already present to others in the culture, always had been. The scholar was editing only the written text of a poem well known and much loved in the oral recitative tradition.

For its form, *Tirumurukārṟuppaṭai* depends on an even older Tamil poetic genre, the war poems (*puram*, or 'exterior' poems)—especially the so-called Guide Poems (*ārruppaṭai*), where one poet guides a poorer colleague toward a patron who would recognise his talent and reward him handsomely. In the Murugan poem, the old secular relation between poet and patron has been transposed into the relation between devotee and god. I shall quote here just one section from 'Murugan: His Places'.

Where goats are slaughtered,
where grains of fine rice are offered
    in several pots with flowers,
and His cock-banner is raised
in the festival of festivals
for many towns around;

wherever devotees praise
and move His heart;

where His spear-bearing shamans
set up yards
for their frenzy dance;

and in forests, parks,
lovely islets in rivers,
streams, pools, certain spots
    like four-way crossroads, meeting places,
cadamba oaks in first flower;

in assemblies under the main tree
and in town halls;

in sacred pillars;

and in the awesome vast temple
where the daughter of the hill tribe
worships
    raising a banner with His splendid bird on it,
    patting white mustard seed into ghee,
    chanting wordlessly her special chants,
    bowing
    and scattering flowers,
    wearing two cloths
        different in color and kind,
    threads of crimson on her wrists,
    scattering parched grain
    and offering soft white rice
        mixed with the blood
        of strong fattened large-footed rams
    in small offerings in several dishes,
    sprinkling sandal fragrances
    with yellow turmeric,
    cutting together red oleander
        and big cool garlands
    and letting them hang,

    blessing the towns
        on the rich hill-slopes,
    offering the sweet smoke of incense,
    singing *kuriñci* songs
        while the roar of waterfalls
        mixes with the music of instruments,
    spreading red flowers,
    spreading fearful blood-smeared millet,

where the daughter of the hill tribe
sounds Murugan's favorite instruments
and offers worship to Murugan

till He arrives
and comes into her
to terrify enemies and deniers:

in that place then
they sing till the dancing yards echo,
they blow all the horns at once,
ring all the crooked bells,
bless His elephant
    with a peacock-shield on his forehead
who never runs from battle.

There
the suppliants offer worship,

ask and ask
as if to ask is to be given already.

He dwells in all such places
and I speak what I truly know.

Nakkiraṉār *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, 6
(Ramanujan 1985, 215–17)

In 1967, Fred Clothey, now a professor of religion at the University of Pittsburgh, studied Murugan, his temples, icons and texts, and wrote a dissertation at the University of Chicago (see Clothey 1978). I was one of his readers, and as I worked with his chapters—I was in Madras that year—a series of prayers formed themselves in my head. The prayers were addressed to Murugan, with many references to the iconography and history I was steeped in, and also to the sixth-century poem that Aiyar, among others, had edited. I will close, somewhat immodestly, with these prayers, 'Prayers to Lord Murugan'. My poem, too, talks about some Indian attitudes to the Indian past, with which I was somewhat despondently preoccupied at the time. I had felt that Sanskrit itself and all that it represented had become an absence, at best a crippling and not an enabling presence, that the future needed a new past. Many things have changed since then and so have I. But the mood, the relation to what the god Murugan means, is a real one, and I hope it speaks not only for me.

Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai is a poem of faith and strength; mine is one of lack and self-doubt, in which it is like some other religious poems (e.g., some *vīraśaiva* poems) that I had translated. These prayers are antiprayers; they use an old poem in a well-known genre to make a new poem to say new things. The past works through the present as the present reworks the past.

PRAYERS TO LORD MURUGAN

1

Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive
at once with cockfight and banner-
dance till on this and the next three
hills

women's hands and the garlands
on the chests of men will turn like
chariotwheels

O where are the cockscombs and where
the beaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads

when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees

waiting for lightnings?

2

Twelve etched arrowheads
for eyes and six unforeseen
faces, and you were not
embarrassed.

Unlike other gods
you found work
for every face,
and made

eyes at only one
woman. And your arms
are like faces with proper
names.

3

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand

in our fight
with the fruit fly.
Tell us,

will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blueprint

city?

4

Lord of great changes and small
cells: exchange our painted grey
pottery

for iron copper the leap of stone horses
our yellow grass and lily seed
for rams'

flesh and scarlet rice for the carnivals
on rivers O dawn of nightmare virgins
bring us

your white-haired witches who wear
three colours even in sleep.

5

Lord of the spoor of the tigress,
outside our town hyenas
and civet cats live
on the kills of leopards
and tigers

too weak to finish what's begun.
Rajahs stand in photographs
over ninefoot silken tigresses
that sycophants have shot.
Sleeping under country fans

hearts are worm cans
turning over continually
for the great shadows
of fish in the open
waters.

We eat legends and leavings,
remember the ivory, the apes,
the peacocks we sent in the Bible
to Solomon, the medicines for smallpox,
the similes

for muslin: wavering snakeskins,
a cloud of steam.
Ever-rehearsing astronauts,
we purify and return
our urine

to the circling body
and burn our faeces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind
the navel.

6

Master of red bloodstrains,
our blood is brown;
our collars white.

Other lives and sixty-
four rumoured arts
tingle,

pins and needles
at amputees' fingertips
in phantom muscle.

7

Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands

capable only of casting
reflections? Lord
of faces,

find us the face
we lost early
this morning.

8

Lord of headlines,
help us read
the small print.

Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.

Lord of solutions,
teach us to dissolve
and not to drown.

9

Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences

from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings

of London and return
the future to what
it was.

10

Lord, return us.
Bring us back
to a litter

of six new pigs in a slum
and a sudden quarter
of harvest.

Lord of the last-born
give us
birth.

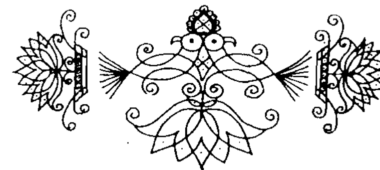
11

Lord of lost travellers,
find us. Hunt us
down.

Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers.

(Ramanujan 1971, 57–62)

Form in Classical Tamil Poetry



Caṅkam, or early classical Tamil literature, is represented by eight anthologies of lyrics, ten long poems, and a work of grammar and poetics called the *Tolkāppiyam*. The dates of these texts are still in some dispute. At least six of the eight anthologies appear to have been compiled, if not composed, during the first three centuries of the common era.

The concern of this paper is not Tamil chronology but Tamil poetry and poetics. Our main source for the poetics is the third section of the *Tolkāppiyam* which summarised in succinct aphorisms (*sūtras*) the canons of the *caṅkam* tradition. Later commentators on the poems and the *Tolkāppiyam* were also very useful. Let me begin with an actual poem (the emphatics in the Tamil text have not been glossed):

nilattiṉum peritee / vaaṉiṉum uyarntaṉṟu /
nīriṉum aarala viṉṟee / caaraṟ
karuṅkooṟ kuṟiñcip puukkoṇṭu
peruntee<u>ṉ</u> iṟaikkum naaṭaṉoṭu naṭpee

earth-than big(ger), sky-than high(er),
water-than hard(er)-to-fathom, mountainslope-
black-stalk-*kuṟiñci*-flower(s)-taking
rich-honey-making-country's-lord with-love

WHAT SHE SAID

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man

of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the *kuṟiñci*
that has such black stalks.

Tēvakulattār, Kuṟuntokai 3 (Ramanujan 1967, 19)

How did the author of the poetics in the *Tolkāppiyam* read this poem? What would an ideal Tamil reader bring to this poem? How did the first-century poet create it? What are the ideas of form relevant to classical Tamil poetry and the particulars of their realisation?

Following the Tamil commentators, one could speak of different kinds of form: (a) the metrical form, and its attendant sound-figures, (b) the linguistic form, (c) the rhetorical strategy of conventions, and (d) the poetic form, which relates all these to each other.

This poem is in *akaval* metre, like most classical Tamil poems: four feet to every line (here indicated by spaces) except for the penultimate which has only three, and the lines are not end-stopped (i.e., they do not necessarily coincide with the end of a sentence or clause); the four lines are held together by the second consonant in each line, in a kind of rhyme or chime; they are enriched by various alliterations (*n . . . n, k . . . k*) and assonances and near-rhymes (*naataṉoṭu natpee*). One should also notice the grammatical form of the poem, the shifting of all the attributes towards the beginning of the poem ('bigger than earth, higher than sky . . .') and the subject of the sentence as well as of the poem, 'love' (*natpee*) to the very end of the piece—a kind of syntactic suspense. Then there are the three simple inequalities (1, 2, 3), and the long compound (*carrar . . . naatan*) which occupies the entire second half of the poem, enacting syntactically the 'inequality' explicitly stated in the poem. The commentators always note such grammatical matters as the syntactic transposition here, though they may not interpret their function.

The Tamil critic would recognise the poem as an *akam*, not a *puṟam*, poem. All *caṅkam* poetry is classified by theme into two kinds: poems of *akam* (the interior) and poems of *puṟam* (the exterior). For example, here is a *puṟam* poem:

KING KIḶḶI IN COMBAT

The festival hour close at hand
his woman in labor
the sun setting behind pouring rains
the needle in the cobbler's hand
is in a frenzy of haste
stitching thongs
for the cot of a king:

such was the swiftness
of the king's tackles,
an *atti* garland round his neck,

as he wrestled with the enemy
come all the way
to take the land.

Cāttantaiyār, Puṟanāṉūṟu 82; Genre: *vākai*

Akam poems are love poems; *puṟam* poems are all other kinds of poems. Usually *puṟam* poems are about good and evil, action, community, kingdom; it is the 'public' poetry of the ancient Tamils, celebrating the ferocity and glory of kings, lamenting the death of heroes, the poverty of poets. Elegy, panegyric, invective, poems on wars and tragic events are *puṟam* poems. More significantly, the two kinds of poetry are structurally different.

Akam poetry is about experience, not action; it is a poetry of the 'inner world', as the word *akam* suggests.

In *Akattiṇai Iyal*, or the chapter on *akam* poetry, the *Tolkāppiyam* distinguished *akam* and *puṟam* conventions as follows:

In (the five phases of) *akam*, no names of persons should be mentioned. Particular names are appropriate only in *puṟam* poetry. (*Tolkāppiyam* 57)

The *dramatis personae* for *akam* are idealised types, such as chieftains representing clans and classes, rather than historical persons. Similarly, landscapes are more important than particular places. The reason for such absence of individuals is given in the word *akam*: the 'interior' world is inexpressible, there are no names there; it has neither geography nor history. It is a poetry of the inner world. The poem quoted above, *Kuṟuntokai* 3, includes no names of people or places; the speaker is merely a 'she'.

The love of man and woman is taken as the ideal expression of the 'inner world', and *akam* poetry is synonymous with love poetry in the Tamil tradition. Love in all its variety (with important exceptions)—love in separation and in union, before and after marriage, in chastity and in betrayal—this is the theme of *akam*.

There are seven types of love, of which the first is *kaikkiḷai* or unrequited love, and the last is *peruntiṇai* or mismatched love. (*Tolkāppiyam* 1)

Peruntiṇai, or the 'major type' (as the *Tolkāppiyam* somewhat cynically calls it) of man-woman relationship is the forced, loveless relationship: a man and a woman, mismatched in age, coming together for duty, convenience, or lust. At the other extreme is *kaikkiḷai* (literally, the 'base relationship'), the one-sided affair, unrequited love or desire inflicted on

an immature girl who does not understand it. Neither of these extremes is the proper subject of *akam* poetry. They are common, abnormal, undignified, fit only for servants.

> Servants and workmen are outside the five *akam* types (of true love), for they do not have the necessary strength of character. (*Tolkāppiyam* 25–6)

Most of the *akam* anthologies contain no poems of unrequited or mismatched love; only *Kalittokai* has a number of examples of both types. *Kaikkiḷai* and *peruntiṇai* have none of the formal constraints on theme and structure that are characteristic of the *akam* poems (see Figure 1).

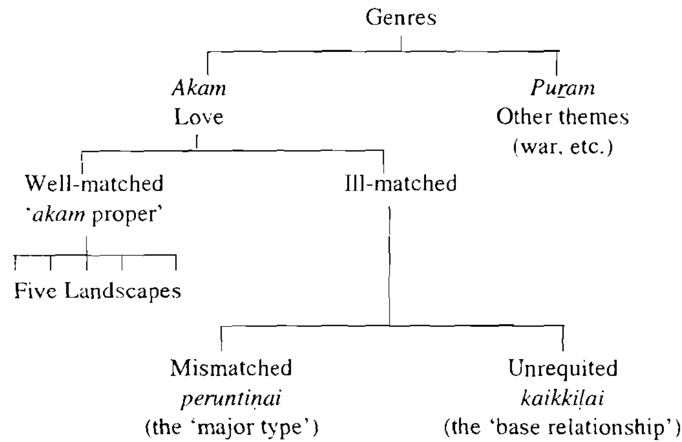


Figure 1

Of the seven types, only 'the middle five' are the subject of true love poetry. The hero and heroine should be 'well-matched on ten points' such as beauty, wealth, age, virtue, rank, etc. Only such a pair is capable of the full range of love: union and separation, anxiety, patience, betrayal, and forgiveness. The couple must be cultured; for the uncultured will be rash, ignorant, self-centred, and therefore unfit for *akam* poetry.

THE FIVE LANDSCAPES

In the chapter on *akam* poetry, the *Tolkāppiyam* concerns itself mainly with the 'middle five' phases or types of love and outlines their symbolic conventions. The other two types, the mismatched and the one-sided affairs, use no special landscapes (see Figure 2).

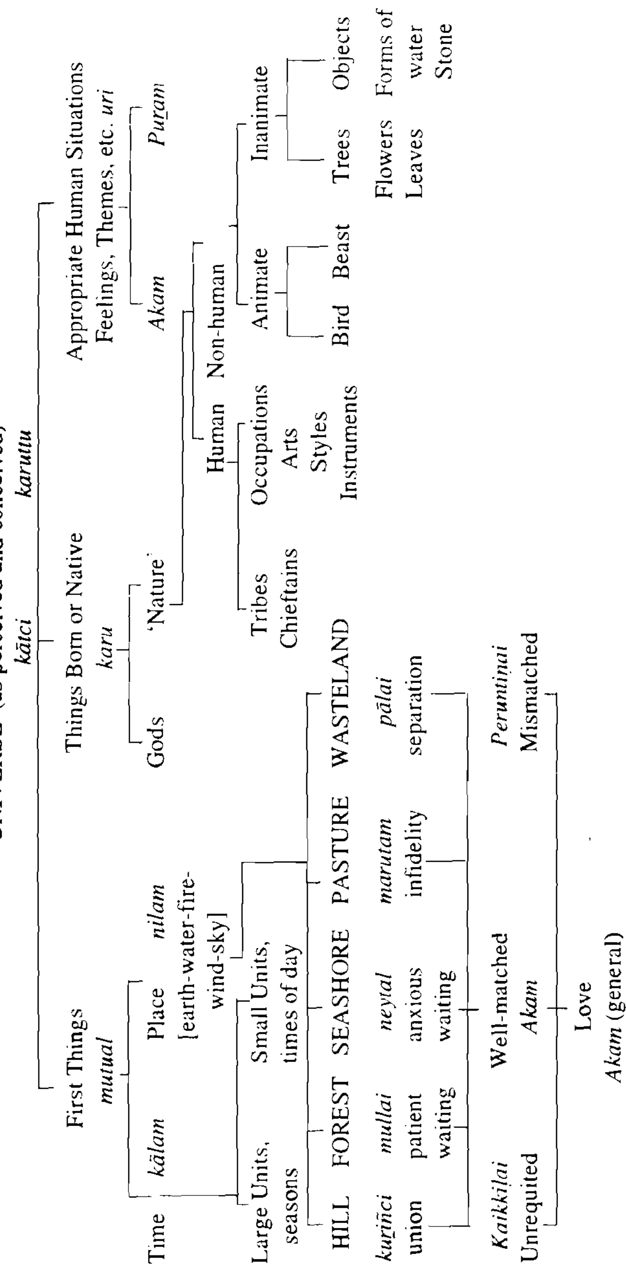


Figure 2

When we examine the materials of a poem, only three things appear to be important: *mutal* (the 'first things'), *karu* (the 'native elements'), *uri* (the 'human feelings' appropriately set in *mutal* and *karu*) (*Tolkāppiyam* 3).

What are called *mutal* or 'first things' are time and place; so say the people who know (*Tolkāppiyam* 4).

There are four kinds of places; each is presided over by a deity and named after a flower or tree characteristic of the region (see Figure 3).

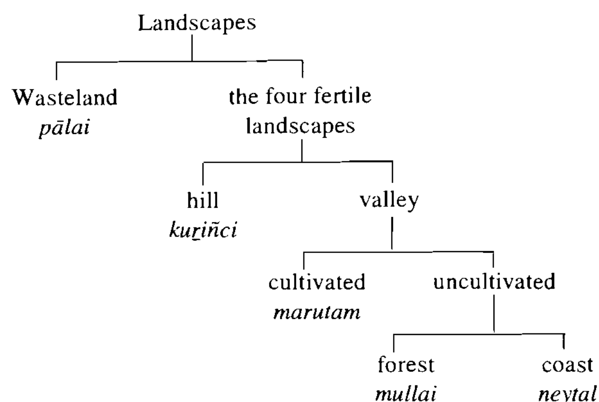


Figure 3

mullai, a variety of jasmine, represents the forests overseen by Māyōn, the dark-bodied god of herdsmen (Viṣṇu); *kuṟiñci*, a mountain flower, stands for the mountains overseen by Murukaṉ, the red-speared god of war, youth and beauty; *marutam*, a tree with red flowers growing near the water, for the pastoral region overseen by Vēntaṉ, the rain-god (Indra); *neytal*, a water-flower, for the sandy sea-shore overseen by Varuṇa, the wind-god (*Tolkāppiyam* 5).

There is also a fifth region, *pālai* or desert waste. *Pālai* has no specific location, for it is thought that any mountain or forest may be parched to a wasteland in the heat of summer. The name is taken from *pālai*, supposedly an evergreen tree that is unaffected by drought.[1]

Time is divided into day, month, and year. The year is divided into six 'large time-units', the six seasons: the rains, the cold season, early frost and late frost, early summer and late summer. The day is divided into five 'small time-units': sunrise, midday, sunset, nightfall, the dead of night. Some would add a sixth, dawn.

Particular 'large time-units' and 'small time-units' are associated by convention with particular regions.

Mullai country is associated with the rainy season and evening; *kuṟiñci*, with the early frost and midnight; *marutam*, with the later part of night and the dawn; *neytal* with the twilight of evening; *pālai* with summer, late frost, and midday (*Tolkāppiyam* 6–12).

Each of the five regions or landscapes is associated further with an appropriate *uri* or phase of love (Figure 4).

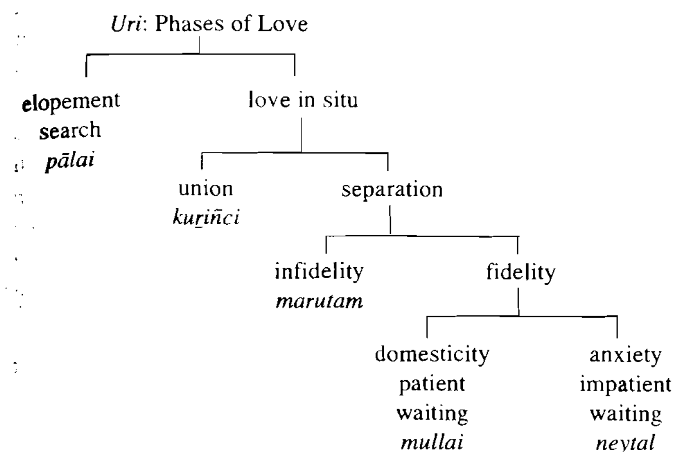


Figure 4

Lovers' union is associated with *kuṟiñci*, the mountains; separation with *pālai*, the desert; patient waiting, with *mullai*, the forests; anxious waiting, with *neytal*, the sea-shore; the lover's infidelity and the beloved's resentment, with *marutam*, the pastoral region (*Tolkāppiyam* 16).

Of these five, the first is clandestine, before marriage; the fourth occurs after marriage. The other three could be either before or after marriage. The fifth, separation, includes not only the hardships of the lover away from his girl, his search for wealth, fame and learning, but also the elopement of the couple, their hardships on the way, and their separation from their parents.

Now, each landscape has its native elements (*karu*): gods, foods, animals, trees, birds, drums, occupations, lutes or musical styles and such others (*Tolkāppiyam* 20).

To these eight, flowers and kinds of running or standing water are also added by later writers, making a total of 14 slots under each landscape.

Thus each phase of love gets its characteristic type of imagery from

a particular landscape. Flower-names like *kuṟiñci, mullai*, etc., are names not only of the landscape but also of the associated feeling and of the type of poetry devoted to them.

Each of these landscapes is now a whole repertoire of images—anything in it, bird or drum, tribal name or dance, may be used to symbolise and evoke a specific feeling.

A conventional design thus provides a live vocabulary of symbols; actual objective landscapes of the Tamil country become the interior landscape of Tamil poetry. The following table lists some of these features (Table 1).

The *Tolkāppiyam* takes care to add that 'birds and beasts of one landscape may sometimes appear in others'; artful poets may work with an 'overlap of genres' (*tiṇaimayakkam*); they may even bring in *puṟam* imagery to heighten the effects of an *akam* poem. The *Tolkāppiyam* further states that the above genres are not rigidly separated; the time and place appropriate to one genre may be fused with the time and place appropriate to another.

Anything other than *uri* or the appropriate mood may be fused or transformed (*Tolkāppiyam* 15).

The following poem is a good example of this mixture of landscapes.[2]

WHAT SHE SAID

The bare root of the bean is pink
like the leg of a jungle hen,
and herds of deer attack its overripe pods.
For the harshness of this early frost
there is no cure

but the breast of my man.

Aḷḷūr Naṉmullai, *Kuṟuntokai* 68 (Ramanujan 1967, 46)

Thus, for poetry the hierarchy of components is inverted; the human elements (*uri*), the native elements (*karu*), and the first elements (*mutal*) are in a descending order of importance for a poet. Mere nature-description or 'imagism' in poetry would be uninteresting to Tamil poets and critics.

POETIC DESIGN

The conventions make for many kinds of economy in poetic design. Consider the first poem again (*Kuṟuntokai* 3, above):

Table 1: Some Features of the Five Landscapes

	Lovers' Union	Patient Waiting, Domesticity	Lover's Unfaithfulness 'Sulking Scenes'	Anxiety in Love, Separation	Elopement, Hardship, Separation from Lover or Parents
Characteristic flower (name of region and poetic genre)	*kuṟiñci*	*mullai* (jasmine)	*marutam*	*neytal*	*pālai* (an evergreen tree)
Landscape	mountains	forest pasture	countryside	seashore	waterland (mountain or forest parched by summer)
Time	night	late evening	morning	nightfall	midday
Season	cold season early frost	rainy season	all seasons	all seasons	late frost, summer
Bird	peacock, parrot	sparrow, jungle hen	stork, heron	seagull	dove, eagle
Beast (including fish, reptile, etc.)	monkey elephant horse, bull	deer	buffalo freshwater fish	crocodile shark	fatigued elephant, tiger or wolf, lizard
Tree or plant	jackfruit bamboo, *vēṅkai*	*koṉṟai*	mango	*atumpu puṉṉai*	*ōmai* cactus
Water	waterfall	rivers	pool	wells sea	waterless wells stagnant water
Occupation and people	hill tribes guarding millet harvest, gathering honey	ploughman	pastoral occupations	selling fish and salt, fisherfolk	wayfarers bandits

WHAT SHE SAID

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man

of the mountain-slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the *kuriñci*
that has such black stalks.

Like most *akam* poems, it has a single spare image.

The *kuriñci* flower and the mountain-scene clearly mark the poem as a *kuriñci* poem about lovers' union. The union is not described or talked about; it is enacted by the 'inset' scene of the bees making honey from the flowers of the *kuriñci*. The lover is not only the lord of the mountain, he is *like* the mountain he owns. Describing the scene describes his passion. The *kuriñci*, being a tree that takes twelve years to come to flower, carries a suggestion assimilating the tree to the young heroine who speaks the poem. The *Tolkāpplyam* calls this technique of using the scene (in Kenneth Burke's terms) to describe act or agent, *ullurai*, 'inner substance'.

The poem opens with large abstractions about her love: her love bigger than the earth and higher than the sky. But it moves toward concreteness of the black-stalked *kuriñci*, acting out by analogue the virgin's progress from abstraction to experience. We may remind ourselves that this progression (from the basic cosmic elements to the specific component of a landscape) is also the method of the entire intellectual framework behind the poetry: from *mutal* to *karu* to *uri*.

Further, in choosing earth, sky, and water for comparison, she has also chosen nature's constants that make up any particular scene. These constants, however, are always interacting, mingling, changing their states and forms. By implication her love, which is constant through change, is greater than these primal constants.

Evocations designed like these may be seen in poem after poem. *Ullurais* of the natural scene (somewhat like G.M. Hopkins' 'inscape') repeat the total action of the poem. Note the irony of the following poem:

WHAT THE CONCUBINE SAID

You know he comes from
where the fresh-water sharks in the pools
catch with their mouths
the mangoes as they fall, ripe
from the trees on the edge of the field.

At our place,
he talked big.

Now, back in his own,
when others raise their hands
and feet,
he will raise his too:
like a doll
in the mirror
he will shadow
every last wish
of his son's dear mother.

Ālankuṭi Vaṅkaṉār, *Kuruntokai* 8 (Ramanujan 1967, 22)

This is a *marutam* poem, a poem about infidelity; the shark, the pool at the edge of the meadow and the mango are properties of the *marutam* landscape and define the *marutam* mood of ironic and sullen comment on a lover's infidelity. The poem moves from the openness of the fields to the closed indoors of the boudoir. The lover, by *ullurai*, is the shark in the pool he owns; the fish gets all it wants without any effort. By comparing herself with the mango, the concubine is reproaching herself for being easily accessible. The last line also contrasts his carefree, cavalier treatment of her with the tight-knit family in which he is now hemmed.

A word about the theory of *ullurai*. *Ullurai*, as indicated earlier, is implicit metaphor. All explicit comparison is suppressed. The *Tolkāppiyam* further states that explicit comparison belongs to the *ulakavarakku*, to worldly usage, whereas *ullurai*, or implicit metaphor, belongs to *ceyyul-varakku*, poetic usage. There are other distinctions to be made. (a) *Ullurai* is a correlation of *karu* to *uri*, of the landscapes and their contents to the human scene. (b) Unlike metaphor in ordinary language, *ullurai* is a structural concept within the poem. (c) *Ullurai* is essentially a metonymy, an *in presentia* relationship, where both terms are present. The man belongs to the scene, the scene represents the man, as in *Kuruntokai* 3 (above). As Kenneth Burke remarks in his *A Grammar of Motives*, 'There is implicit in the quality of a scene the quality of the action implicit in it . . . (though) one could not deduce the details of the action from the details of the setting' (1945, 6–7). (d) *Ullurai*, unlike metaphor and simile, leaves out all the *points* of comparison and all explicit markers of comparison (e.g., 'like,' 'as'), which increases many-fold the power of the figure. This kind of 'metonymous metaphor' based on an entire formal scheme is a special feature of the classical Tamil poetic form.

But then *ullurais* are not indiscriminately used; they are specially preferred only in the most structured of Tamil poetic genres—the ideal

five-fold *akam*; they are not used in the *peruntinai* (the mismatched affair), nor preferred in the heroic *puṟam* poems.

The Tamil theory of comparison deserves a paper to itself. I shall content myself here with only one of its features. All comparisons, says the *Tolkāppiyam*, including both metaphor and metonymy, involve several terms of comparison. These terms may refer to shape or colour or to action or result (Figure 5).

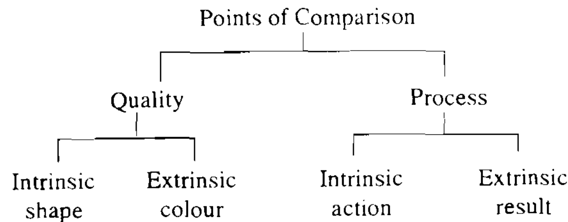


Figure 5

One or more of these may be present in any comparison. For instance, in *Kuṟuntokai* 3 the emphasis is on the action of the bee and the resulting honey. In the following poem the comparison is more complex:

WHAT HE SAID

As a little white snake
with lovely stripes on its young body
troubles the jungle elephant
    this slip of a girl
    her teeth like sprouts of new rice
    her wrists stacked with bangles
    troubles me.

Catti Nātaṉār, *Kuṟuntokai* 119 (Ramanujan 1967, 54)

The 'stripes/bangles' pair illustrates the 'shape/colour' terms, the 'snake/elephant' pair the 'action/result' terms.

The personae. Little need be said about the characters or the situations which these poems imply. The *dramatis personae* are limited by convention to a small number: the hero, the heroine, the hero's friend(s) or messengers, the heroine's friend and foster-mother, the concubine and passers-by. Each landscape has its special clan chiefs who are the exponents of the mood associated with that landscape. No poet here speaks in his own voice; and no poem is addressed to a reader. The reader

only overhears what the characters say to each other or to themselves or to the moon. A poem in this tradition implies, evokes, enacts a drama in a monologue.

The situations when a hero or heroine or one of their companions may speak out, and to whom, are also closely defined. For example,

> The girl-friend of the heroine may speak out on the following occasions: when the heroine, left behind by her lover, speaks of her loneliness; when she helps them elope; when she begs the hero to take good care of the heroine; when she tries to dissuade the parents from their search for the runaway couple, or to console the grieving mother. . . . (*Tolkāppiyam* 42).

An interesting convention restricts the imagery for different speakers within the poems. The heroine's images are confined to what surrounds her house or to general notions and hearsay (*Kuṟuntokai* 3, above). The concubine or the heroine's girl-friend or foster-mother have more ranging images: they are of a lower class, their experience is wider. The man's imagery has great range. Apparently there are no limits to his experience, and therefore to his imagery. The range of imagery, not only its quality or content but also its very narrowness or width of choice, indirectly characterises the speaker and his class. For instance, *Kuṟuntokai* 119 is spoken by the man; it mentions jungle snakes and elephants. The next poem, spoken by the girl-friend, ranges over crocodiles, the traffic on the water-ways and poisoned twins.

WHAT HER GIRL-FRIEND SAID TO HIM

when he wanted to come by night

Man-eaters, male crocodiles with crooked legs,
cut off the traffic on these waterways.
    But you,
in your love, will come to her swimming
through the shoals of fish in the black salt marshes.
    And she,
she will suffer in her simpleness.
    And I,
what can I do but shudder in my heart
like a woman watching her poisoned twins?

Kavaimakaṉ, *Kuṟuntokai* 324 (Ramanujan 1967, 93)

The two proprieties. The *Tolkāppiyam* speaks of 'two kinds of proprieties: those of drama and those of the world.' The conventional proprieties outlined so far are of the mode of drama. The situations of real life

in the real world are governed by another set of proprieties. The strategy of the poet is to deploy both, to keep the tension between the forms of art and the forms of the world.

The real land and the vivid particulars of bird, beast, insect, drum-beat, and falling water are brought into the highly formal scheme of idealised landscapes that have neither name nor history. For instance, the botanical observation of the classical Tamil poets is breathtakingly accurate. A recent book in Tamil by a botanist, B.L. Swami, documents what one always suspected. For instance, why did the Tamil poets pick on the *kuṟiñci* as the one flower that will name the mountain landscape and the mood of first love? Here are a few botanical facts: the *kuṟiñci* plant, of the *Strobilanthus* group, grows only 6,000 feet above seal-level; so it is the mountain-flower par excellence. Botanical calendars kept for over a century on south Indian hills like the Nilgiris show that a *kuṟiñci* tree comes to flower only from nine to twelve years after it is planted—this identifies it with the tropical virgin heroine who comes to puberty at the same age.

And the *kuṟiñci* plants flower all at once on the mountain-slopes, covering them with millions of blossoms, certainly a great symbol for the suddenness and the overwhelming nature of first love. It is a 'honey' flower, for it is rich in honey and flowers by the million. The bees that frequent it frequent no other, thus making what bee-keepers call the 'unifloral honey', which is as rich as it is rare and pure. Furthermore, the *kuṟiñci* is fiercely competitive—it permits no other tree to grow in its neighbourhood.

Thus is the real world always kept in sight and included in the ideal symbolic. This is especially true of the *akam* poems, poems of the inner world, whose themes are not explicated by word and deed as *puṟam* poems are. In this view of the relationship of reality to poetry, they seem to anticipate Marianne Moore who suggested that poets ought to be 'literalists of the imagination' and that poems ought to be 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' (1961, 41).

In a sense, the tradition of conventions does everything possible to depersonalise the poetry of *akam*. It gives all that can be *given* to a poet, and makes of poetry a kind of second language.

The poet's language is not only Tamil; the landscapes, the personae, the appropriate moods, all become a language within language. Like a native speaker he makes 'infinite use of finite means', to say with familiar words what has never been said before; he can say exactly what

he wants to, without even being aware of the ground-rules of his grammar. If the world is a vocabulary of the poet, the conventions are his syntax.

The lyric poet likes to find ways of saying many things while saying one thing; he would like to suggest an entire astronomy by his specks and flashes. Towards this end, the Tamil poets used a set of five landscapes and formalised the world into a symbolism. By a remarkable consensus, they all spoke this common language of symbols for some five or six generations. Each could make his own poem and by doing so allude to every other poem which had been, was being, or would be written in this symbolic language. Thus poem became relevant to poem, as if they were all written by a single hand. The spurious name *caṅkam* ('fraternity', 'community') for this poetry was justified not by history but by the poetic practice.

But this is only half the story. The scheme should include (a) the *puṟam* poems, and (b) the mismatched and the one-sided love-affairs as well—for they define by contrast the tight structure of *akam*.

The *puṟam* poems correspond in many respects to the *akam* poems. A set of *puṟam/akam* correspondences is displayed in Table 2.

Whereas *akam* poems tend to focus on a single spare image, in *puṟam* poems images rush and tumble over one another. Yet they often use the same flowers and landscapes with a devastatingly different effect:

WHEN THE NEYTAL FLOWERED—IN PRAISE OF
KING CĒRALĀTAṈ

Fish leaping
in fields of sheep.
Rash unploughed sowing
in the haunts of the wild boar.
Big-eyed buffalo herds
stopped by lilies in sugarcane beds.

Ancient cows bend
over water-flowers
where once busy dancers
did the Devil's Mask.

The tall coconut, the sounding *marutam*
now feed
the mouth of a stream
and a flowering pool.

Table 2: *Puṟam/Akam* Correspondences

	Puṟam	*Uri*	*Akam*	*Uri*	Some Features Common to Both
1	*veṭcikarantai*	cattle-lifting prelude to war	*kuṟiñci*	first union	night, hillside; clandestine affair
2	*vañci*	preparation for war	*mullai*	separation (patience)	forest, rainy season; separation from loved ones
3	*uriñainocci*	siege	*marutam*	infidelity (conflict)	fertile area (city, etc.), dawn; refusing entry
4	*tumpai*	battle	*neytal*	separation (anxiety)	seashore, open battleground, no season; evening; grief
5	*vākai*	ideals of achievement	*pālai*	elopement, search for wealth, fame, etc.	any landscape, any clan; praise
6	*kāñci*	struggle for excellence; endurance	*peruntiṇai*	mismatched love	no landscape; struggle, defeat
7	**pāṭāṇ*	elegy, praise for heroes, asking for gifts, invective	*kaikkiḷai*	unrequited love	no landscape; a one-sided relationship

*Not the name of a tree or a flower

No clear distinction is made in the *puṟam* between the last two and the rest, as in the *akam*. *Pāṭāṇ* also appears to be a mixed class. Later writers separate the 'Ideal *Akam* Fivefold' from all the rest, count *karantai* (in 1) and *nocci* (in 3) as separate classes, add a 'general' class, and make a twelve-fold *puṟam*.

Gone are the villages
sung in song. Faces
of terror instead of beauty,
they look like a corpse
killed and stood up
by Death.

For your rage
water and village are one;
waves of sugarcane blossom
are one stalk of grass;
the ashen babul of the twisted fruit
twined with the giant black babul,
the she-devil with the branching crest
roams
astraddle on the donkey;
and the small persistent thorn
is spread in the moving dust of battlefields.

The dead hearts of public places are filled
with dirt and turds and silence,
and the ruins chill
all courage and desire.

But here,
the sages have sought your woods.
In open spaces the fighters play
with their bright-jewelled women.
The traveller is safe on the highway.
The sellers of grain shelter their dear kin
and shelter even the distant kin.
The Silver Star will not go near
the place of Mars. And it rains
on the thirsty fields. Hunger has fled
and taken Disease with her. O Great One,

in your land it blossoms
everywhere.

Kumaṭṭūr Kaṇṇaṉār, *Patiṟṟuppattu* 13; Genre: *pāṭāṇ*
(Ramanujan 1967, 102–3)

The plant names are the same: sugarcane, *neytal, marutam*. But the landscapes are confused as after the ravages of war. The poem clearly falls into two parts, celebrating the destructive and protective functions of a king. The flowering is different in the two parts: tragic in the first,

with the killing fertility of the wilderness where once the city was; joyous and right in the second part, in the king's own flourishing kingdom.

The *akam/puṟam* correspondences are not strict, but still close enough to allow us to integrate the two genres. (a) All but one of the *puṟam* genres bear the name of a flower, like the five *akam* genres; yet not all the contents of the landscape are used symbolically as in *akam*. (b) The corresponding *akam/puṟam* genres have many common features, as pointed out by the *Tolkāppiyam*.

Such correspondences should not be frozen into an exact taxonomy, for the Tamils never do so—they always make room for 'overlap of classes' (*tiṇaimayakkam*) and 'leftover classes' (e.g., *potuṉilai*).

Taken in the large, the two themes, love and war—*akam* and *puṟam*—become metaphors for one another: contrasted in theme and structure but unified by imagery. This is why the same poets could write both *akam* and *puṟam* poems. Some poems explicitly place love and war together:

The dark-clustered *nocci*
blends with the land
that knows no dryness;
the colors on the leaves
mob the eyes.
We have seen that leaf
on jewelled women
on their lovely wide-angled mounds
of venus.
Now the nocci-wreath lies slashed
on the ground, so changed, so mixed
with blood the vulture snatches it
thinking it raw meat.
We see this too
just because a young man
in love with war
wore it for glory.

Veṟipāṭiya Kāmakkāṇiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 271;
Genre: *nocci/veṭci*

The evergreen leaves of the *nocci* were used as leaf-skirts by women and as laurels by warriors. The *nocci* leaf is part of *kuṟiñci* (union) in love and of *uṇinai* (battle) in war; the very juxtaposition brings the irony home sharply.

One more contrast should be noticed before we leave the subject of *akam* and *puṟam*. *Akam* means 'interior', *puṟam* 'exterior'. Yet the love poetry, usually taken to be the most private and personal expression, is the most formally structured type in the Tamil tradition; no names, individuals, or places are allowed here, only classes, ideal types; for in this inner world there are no names or individuals. *Puṟam*, the so-called 'public poetry', is allowed names, places, expression of personal circumstances in a real society, a real history and freedom from the necessities of poetic convention both in *uḷḷuṟai* and in the landscapes. Thus it is the 'public' *puṟam* poetry that becomes the vehicle of personal expression and of the celebration of historical personages. Here is a poem quoted early in this paper:

KING KIḶḶI IN COMBAT

The festival hour close at hand
his woman in labor
the sun setting behind pouring rains

the needle in the cobbler's hand
is in a frenzy of haste
stitching thongs
for the cot of a king:

such was the swiftness
of the king's tackles,
an *atti* garland round his neck,
as he wrestled with the enemy
come all the way
to take the land.

Cāttantaiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 82; Genre: *vākai*

Quite in contrast to both *akam* and *puṟam*, especially the tightly-structured, well-formed *akam*, stands the mismatched affair or *peruntiṇai*. Here is an example from *Kalittokai*, probably the latest of the eight anthologies:

O hunchback woman,
gentle
and crooked as a reflection
in the water,
what great good deeds
did you do that I should want you so?

(O mother! she swore to herself) Some
auspicious moment made you a dwarf,
so tiny you're almost invisible,
O whelp born to a man-faced bird,
how dare you stop us to say
you want us? Would such midgets
ever get to touch such as us!

O lovely one,
curvaceous,
convex
as the blade of a plough,
you strike me with a love
I cannot bear.
I can live
only by your grace.

(Look at the way this creature works!)
O dwarf, standing piece of timber,
you've yet to learn the right approach
to girls. Humans do not copulate
at noon: but you come now to hold
our hand and ask us to your place.
Have you had many women?

Good woman,
your waist is higher
than your head, your face a skinned heron
with a digger for a beak,
listen to me.
If I take you in the front, your hunch
juts into my chest; if from the back
it'll tickle me in odd places.
So I'll not
even try it. Yet come close and let's touch
side to side.

Chī, you're wicked. Get lost! You half-man!
As creepers hang on only to the crook of a tree
there are men who'd love to hold this hunch
of a body close, though nothing fits. Yet, you lecher,
you ask for us sideways. What's so wrong
with us, you ball, you bush of a man.
A gentle hunchback type is better far than a string
of black beans.
(Look at the walk of this creature!) You stand
like a creepy turtle stood up by somebody,

hands flailing in your armpits.
We've told you we're not for you. Yet you hang around.
(Look, he walks now like the Love-God!)

The root of this love is Kāma,
the love-god with arrows, brother to Shāma.
Look, this is how the love-god walks!
(Look,
look at this love-god!)
Come, let's find joy,
you in me, me in you; come, let's ask and tell
and agree which parts I touch.
I swear
by the feet of my king, I'll mock you no more.
Right, O gentle-breasted one. I too will give up mockery.
But I don't want this crowd in the temple
laughing at us, screaming when we do it,
'Look, look! Look at that dwarf and hunchback,
leaping like demon on demon!'

O shape
of unbeaten gold, let's get away from the temple
to the wild jasmine bush. Come, let's go.
You're now a gob of wax on a parchment
made out in a court full of wise men,
and stamped
to a seal; you're now flat, incomplete. Come,
let's touch close and hug hard
and finish the unfinished.
Let's go.

Marutaṉilanākaṉār, *Kalittokai* 94; Genre: *peruntiṇai*

Note the unheroic, even anti-heroic, mock-heroic quality of the hunchback and the dwarf, looking not for love but frankly for sex; the folk-like bawdy, the earthy humour. There are no landscapes. The metaphors are bold, explicit. The two persons are not even young—one of them is 'a skinned heron.' This is *peruntiṇai*, the 'major type', depicting the common human condition, love among the misfits, with no scruples regarding the niceties of the time or of the landscape; moving from mockery to coupling in the course of a conversation. Their misfit is evident even in their bodies' lack of fit. We have also shifted from the dramatic monologues of *akam* and *puṟam* to dramatic dialogue and interaction, from lyric to drama. As in a drama, the characters and their speech change: the hunchback begins with a royal *we* in her rejection and ends with an *I* in yielding; her mocking exclamations to herself drop off.

If the *akam* has the most tightly structured symbolic language, the *peruntiṇai* is free and realistic, with real toads in real cesspools.

We have not yet spoken of one genre: the *kaikkiḷai*, one-sided or unrequited love. There are not many classical examples of unrequited love. Here is a possible one, though from *Kuṟuntokai*:

WHAT HE SAID

When love is ripe beyond bearing
and goes to seed,
men will ride even palmyra stems
like horses; will wear on their heads
the reeking cones of the *erukkam* bud
like flowers; will draw to themselves
the gossip of the streets;

and will do worse.

Pēreyiṉ Muṟuvalār, *Kuṟuntokai* 17 (Ramanujan 1967, 27)

The most significant observation on *kaikkiḷai* (not found in the *Tolkāppiyam* but in later commentaries) is that such expression of one-sided love is appropriate only to religion. Post-classical Tamil *bhaktas*, preoccupied with their unrequited love for god, their cloud of unknowing, created the most poignant poems of *kaikkiḷai*.

Thus the four genres (*akam, peruntiṇai, kaikkiḷai* and *puṟam*) cover and formalise the main possibilities of lyric poetry. They define each other mutually. A great deal of Western love poetry would probably be described by the ancient commentators as the one-sided *kaikkiḷai*; a great deal of modern poetry, fiction and black comedy as love among the misfits or *peruntiṇai*—exploring the unheroic, the anti-heroic, presenting the ironies of incapacity.

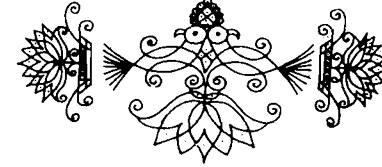
As within the five *akam* landscapes, poem becomes relevant to poem, across the four genres.

St.-John Perse (1966, 40) tells the story of a Mongolian conqueror,

. . . taker of a bird in its nest, and of the nest in its tree, who brought back with bird and nest and song the whole natal tree itself, torn from its place with its multitude of roots, its ball of earth and its border of soil, remnant of home territory evoking a field, a province, a country and an empire. . . .

To translate the poetry of another age or culture is to be such a Mongolian conqueror, for poetry has its ecology. Poems involve more than poems. What is usually called 'content' is really 'form' to the artist.

On Translating a Tamil Poem



I

How does one translate a poem from another time, another culture, another language? The poems I translate from Tamil were written two thousand years ago in a corner of south India, in a Dravidian language relatively untouched by the other classical language of India, Sanskrit. Of the literatures of the world at that time, Sanskrit in India, Greek and Latin in Europe, Hebrew in the Middle East, and Chinese in the Far East were Tamil's contemporaries. Over two thousand Tamil poems of different lengths, by over four hundred poets, arranged in nine anthologies, have survived the vagaries of politics and wars; changes of taste and religion; the crumbling of palm leaves; the errors and poverty of scribes; the ravages of insects, heat, cold, water, and fire.

The subject of this paper is not the fascinating external history of this literature, but translation, the transport of poems from classical Tamil to modern English; the hazards, the damages in transit, the secret paths, and the lucky bypasses.

The chief difficulty of translation is its impossibility. Frost once even identified poetry as that which is lost in translation. Once we accept that as a premise of this art, we can proceed to practise it, or learn (endlessly) to do so. As often as not, this love, like other loves, seems to be begotten by Despair upon Impossibility, in Marvell's phrase. Let me try to define this 'impossibility' a little more precisely.

Here is a poem from an early Tamil anthology, *Aiṅkuṟuṉūṟu* 203, in modern Tamil script (Ramanujan 1985, 230).

அன்னாய் வாழிவேண் டன்னைநம் படப்பைத்
தேன்மயங்கு பாலினு மினிய வவர்நாட்
டுவலைக் கூவற் கீழ
மானுண் டெஞ்சிய கலுழி நீரே.

Tamil script

Transcribed in phonemic Roman script, it looks like this:

aṉṉay vāḻivēṇ ṭaṉṉainam paṭappait
tēṉmayaṅku pāliṉu miṉiya vavarnāṭ
ṭuvalaik kūvaṟ kīḻa
māṉuṇ teñciya kaliḻi nīrē

How shall we divide up and translate this poem? What are the units of translation? We may begin with the sounds. We find at once that the sound system of Tamil is very different from English. For instance, Old Tamil has six nasal consonants: a labial, a dental, an alveolar, a retroflex, a palatal and a velar—m, n, ṉ, ñ, ṅ, n—three of which are not distinctive in English. How shall we translate a six-way system into a three-way English system (m, n, ṅ)? Tamil has long and short vowels, but English (or most English dialects) have diphthongs and glides. Tamil has double consonants that occur in English only across phrases like 'ho*t t*in' and 's*it t*ight.' Such features are well illustrated by the above poem in Tamil. Tamil has no initial consonant clusters, but English abounds in them: '*sch*ool, *scr*atch, *spl*ash, *str*ike', etc. English words may end in stops, as in 'cu*t*, cu*p*, tuc*k*,' etc.; Tamil words do not. When we add up these myriad systemic differences, we cannot escape the fact that phonologies are systems unto themselves (even as grammatical, syntactic, lexical, semantic systems too are, as we shall see). Any unit we pick is defined by its relations to other units. So it is impossible to translate the phonology of one language into that of another—even in a related, culturally neighbouring language. We can map one system on to another, but never reproduce it. A poem is identical only with itself—if that. If we try and even partially succeed in mimicking the sounds, we may lose everything else, the syntax, the meanings, the poem itself, as in this delightful example of a French phonological translation of an English nursery rhyme:

Humpty Dumpty	*Un petit d'un petit*
Sat on a wall	*S'etonne aux Halles*
Humpty Dumpty	*Un petit d'un petit*
Had a great fall	*Ah! degres te fallent*
And all the king's horses	*Indolent qui ne sort cesse*
And all the king's men	*Indolent qui ne se mene*
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty	*Qu'importe un petit d'un petit*
Together again.	*Tout Gai de Reguennes.*

Sometimes it is said that we should translate metrical systems. Metre is a second-order organisation of the sound system of a language, and partakes of all the above problems and some more. At readings someone in the audience always asks, 'Did you translate the metre?' as if it is

possible to do so. Tamil metre depends on the presence of long vowels and double consonants, and on closed and open syllables defined by such vowels and consonants. For instance, in the first word of the above poem, *aṉṉāy*, the first syllable is heavy because it is closed (*aṉ-*), the second is heavy because it has a long vowel (*-ṉāy*). There is nothing comparable in English to this way of counting feet and combinations (marked in the text above by spaces). Even if we take familiar devices like rhyme, they do not have the same values in different languages. English has a long tradition of end-rhymes—but Tamil has a long tradition of second syllable consonant-rhymes. In the above poem the first, second and fourth lines have *ṉ* as the second consonant in the line-initial words *aṉṉāy*, *tēṉ* and *māṉ*. End-rhymes in Tamil are a *modern* innovation, just as second syllable rhymes in English would be considered quite experimental. The tradition of one poetry would be the innovation of another.

Let us look at the grammar briefly. If we separate and display the meaningful units of the above poem, we see the following:

aṉṉāy vāḻi vēṇṭ[u] aṉṉai[A] */ nam paṭappai-t-*
tēn-mayaṅku-pāl-iṉum iṉiya[B] */ [v]avar nāṭ-*
ṭ[u] uvalai-k-kūval-kīḻa
māṉ-uṇṭ[u]-eñciya kaliḻi nire[C] */*

The translation, piece by piece, would be:

mother, may [you]-live, desire [to listen], mother,[A] / our garden-
honey-mixed-with-milk-than sweet[er][B] / [is] his land's,
[in-] leaf-holes-low,
animals-having-drunk-[and-] leftover, muddied water[C] /

In my English rendering it becomes the following:

WHAT SHE SAID

to her girl friend, when she returned
from the hills

Bless you, friend. Listen.
Sweeter than milk
mixed with honey from our gardens

is the leftover water in his land,

low in the waterholes
covered with leaves

and muddied by animals.

Kapilar, *Aiṅkuṟuṉūṟu* 203 (Ramanujan 1985, 10)

One can see right away that Tamil has no copula verbs for equational sentences in the present tense, as in English, e.g., 'Tom *is* a teacher'; no degrees of comparison in adjectives as in English, e.g., 'sweet, sweeter, sweetest'; no articles like 'a, an, the'; and so on. Tamil expresses the semantic equivalents of these grammatical devices by various other means. Grammars constrain what can be said directly and what can be left unsaid. An English friend of mine with a French wife, with whom he spoke French at home, used to complain half-jokingly that he could never tell his wife, 'I went out with a friend for a drink last night,' without having to specify the gender of the friend. The constraints of French require you to choose a gender for every noun, but English does not. The lies and ambiguities of one language are not those of another.

Evans-Pritchard, the anthropologist, used to say: If you translate all the European arguments for atheism into Azande, they would come out as arguments for God in Azande. Such observations certainly disabuse us of the commonly-held notion of 'literal' translation. We know now that no translation can be 'literal,' or 'word for word'. That is where the impossibility lies. The only possible translation is a 'free' one.

When we attend to syntax, we see that Tamil syntax is mostly left-branching. English syntax is, by and large, rightward. Even a date like 'the 19th of June, 1988,' when translated into Tamil, would look like '1988, June, 19.' A phrase like

A B C D E

The man who came from Michigan

would be 'Michigan-from come-[past tense]-who man':

E D C B A

micigan-ilirundu vand-a manidan.

The Tamil sentence is the mirror image of the English one: what is A B C D E in the one would be (by and large) E D C B A in Tamil. This would also be true of many other Indian languages. Postpositions instead of prepositions, adjectival clauses before nominal phrases, verbs at the end rather than in the middle of sentences—these characterise Tamil, and not only Tamil. (Turkish, Japanese, and Welsh are also left-branching languages). The American English style of *Time* magazine, affected by German, Yiddish, or whatever affects *Time*, leans towards the left-branching—in Alexander Woollcott's parody, 'Backward run the sentences till boggles the mind.'

Not that English does not have left-branching possibilities, but they are a bit abnormal, as Woollcott suggests. There are writers who prefer to use them for special effects. Hopkins and Dylan Thomas used those possibilities stunningly, as we see in Thomas's 'A Refusal to Moum the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London', for example (Thomas 1953, 112); both were Welshmen, and Welsh is a left-branching language. But, in Hopkins's and Thomas's poetry the leftward syntax is employed for special poetic effects—it alternates with other, more 'normal', types of English sentences. In Tamil poetry the leftward syntax is not eccentric, literary or offbeat, but part of everyday 'natural' speech. One could not use Dylanese to translate Tamil, even though many of the above phrases from Thomas can be translated comfortably with the same word order in Tamil. What is everyday in one language must be translated by what is everyday in the 'target' language also, and what is eccentric must find equally eccentric equivalents.

If poetry is made out of, among other things, 'the best words in the best order', and the best orders of the two languages are the mirror images of each other, what is a translator to do? Many of my devices (e.g., indentation, spacing) and compromises are made in order to mimic closely the syntactic suspense of the original, without, I hope, estranging the English. Frequently the poems unify their rich and diverse patterns by using a single, long, marvelously managed sentence. I try to make my translation imitate a similar management, even in the relatively simple examples cited here.

The most obvious parts of language cited frequently for their utter untranslatability are the lexicon and the semantics of words. For lexicons are culture-specific. Terms for fauna, flora, caste distinctions, kinship systems, body parts, even the words that denote numbers, are culturally loaded. Words are enmeshed in other words—in collocations, in what can go with what ('a blue moon, a red letter day, a white elephant, purple prose'). Words participate in sets, in contrasts, in mutual recallings. 'Red' is part of a paradigm of colours like green, yellow, etc., with which it contrasts. It is also part of a paradigm of near-terms or hyponyms, 'scarlet, crimson, pink, rosy,' etc. These collocations and paradigms make for metonymies and metaphors, multiple contextual meanings, clusters special to each language, quite untranslatable into another language like Tamil. Even when the elements of a system may be similar in two languages, like father, mother, brother, mother-in-law, etc., in kinship, the system of relations (say, who can be a mother-in-law, who can by law or custom marry whom) and the feelings traditionally encouraged

about each relative (e.g., through mother-in-law jokes, step-mother tales, incest taboos) are all culturally sensitive and therefore part of the expressive repertoire of poets and novelists.

Add to this the entire poetic tradition, its rhetoric, the ordering of different genres with different functions in the culture, which, by its system of differences, distinguishes this particular poem, 'What She Said,' from all others. Tamil classical poetry would call the poem an 'interior,' or *akam* poem, a poem about love and its different phases. Contrasted to it are 'exterior' or *puṟam* poems, which are usually public poems about war, society, the poverty of poets, the death of heroes and so on. An example would be *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 310, a poem by Poṉmuṭiyār, which I have translated as 'A Young Warrior' and have quoted and discussed in chaps. 1 and 9 above.

Now, the classical Tamil poetic tradition uses an entire taxonomy, a classification of reality, as part of its stock-in-trade. The five landscapes of the Tamil area, characterised by hills, seashores, agricultural areas, wastelands, and pastoral fields, each with its forms of life, both natural and cultural, trees, animals, tribes, customs, arts and instruments—all these become part of the symbolic code for the poetry. Every landscape, with all its contents, is associated with a mood or phase of love or war. The landscapes provide the signifiers. The five real landscapes of the Tamil country become, through this system, the interior landscapes of Tamil poetry. And each landscape or mood is also associated with a time of day and a season. Each landscape, along with its mood and the genre of poetry built around it, is usually named after a tree or flower of that region. For instance, the first poem we cited is a *kuṟiñci* poem—*kuṟiñci* is a plant that grows six thousand to eight thousand feet above sea level—representing the mountains, the night, the season of dew, the mood of first love, and the lovers' first secret sexual union. In the war poems the same landscape is the scene for another kind of clandestine action: a night attack on a fort set in the hills.

The love poems and war poems are somewhat similarly classified (though the war poems use the landscapes differently and less strictly). So when we move from one to the other we are struck by the associations across them, forming a web not only of the *akam* and *puṟam* genres, but also of the five landscapes with all their contents signifying moods, and the themes and motifs of love and war (for details, see chap. 10, 'Form in Classical Tamil Poetry', above).

Love and war become metaphors for one another, enmesh one

another, in poems like 'A Young Warrior' (quoted in chaps. 1 and 9 above; Ramanujan 1985, 165) and the following:

WHAT HER MOTHER SAID

If a calving cow
chewed up her purslane creeper
growing near the house,

she'd throw the ball to the ground,
push away the doll,
and beat herself on her pretty tummy,
my little girl,
who knows now how to do things.

With a look tender as a doe's,
she'd refuse the milk
mixed with honey
her foster-mother and I would bring,
she'd sob and cry.

Yet today,
trusting the lies
of a blackbeard man
she's gone
through the wilderness, laughing,
they say,
showing her white teeth
like new buds on a palm tree.

Anonymous, *Naṟṟiṇai* 179 (Ramanujan 1985, 65)

In the following poem, the same evergreen tree, *nocci*, entwines the two themes of love and war in an ironic juxtaposition. A wreath of *nocci* is worn by warriors in war poems; a *nocci* leafskirt is given by a lover to his woman in love poems.

A LEAF IN LOVE AND WAR

The chaste trees, dark-clustered,
blend with the land
that knows no dryness;
the colours on the leaves
mob the eyes.

We've seen those leaves
on jewelled women,
on their mounds
of love.

Now the chaste wreath lies slashed
on the ground, so changed, so mixed
with blood, the vulture snatches it
with its beak,
thinking it raw meat.

We see this too
just because a young man
in love with war
wore it for glory.

Veṟipāṭiya Kāmakkaṇṇiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 271
(Ramanujan 1985, 186)

Thus a language within a language becomes the second language of Tamil poetry. Not only Tamil, but the landscapes and all their contents, the system of genres, themes, and allusions, become the language of this poetry. Like ordinary language, this art-language too makes possible (in Wilhelm Humboldt's phrase) 'an infinite use of finite means'. When one translates, one is translating not only Tamil, its phonology, grammar and semantics, but this entire intertextual web, this intricate yet lucid second language of landscapes which holds together natural forms with cultural ones in a code, a grammar, a rhetoric, and a poetics.

II

I would now like to take a closer look at the original of Kapilar's poem, *Aiṅkuṟuṉūṟu* 203, 'What She Said', and my translation, quoted earlier in this essay.

The word *aṉṉāy* (in spoken Tamil, *amma*), literally 'mother', is a familiar term of address for any woman, here a 'girl friend'. So I have translated it as 'friend', to make clear that the poem is not addressed to a mother (as some other poems are) but to a girl friend.

Note the long, crucial, left-branching phrase in Tamil: '. . . *his land's / [in-] leaf-holes low / animals-having-drunk-[and]-leftover, muddied water*' (in a piece-by-piece translation). In my English, it becomes 'the leftover water in his land, / low in the waterholes / covered with leaves / and muddied by animals.'

I have omitted their 'drinking', as it is suggested by 'waterhole' in English. I had to expand 'the leaf (covered) holes' in Tamil to 'waterholes covered with leaves', making explicit what is understood in the original.

My phrase order in English tries to preserve the order and syntax of themes, not of single words: (1) his land's water, followed by (2) leaf-covered waterholes, and (3) muddied by animals. I still could not bring the word 'sweeter' (*iṉiya*) into the middle of the poem as the original does. That word *iṉiya* is the fulcrum (in the original) which balances the two phrases, the one about milk and honey, and the one about the muddied water. It weighs the speaker's entire childhood's milk and honey against the sexual pleasure of the leaf-covered waterholes muddied by animals. The presence of nineteen nasals in the Tamil poem foregrounds the *ṉ* in this central word *iṉiya*—quite untranslatably. Since it is such an important word for the poem's themes, I put it at the head of the sentence in my translation, preferring the inversion (which I usually avoid) to the weaker placing of 'sweeter than' in the middle of the poem. The latter choice would have also forced me to invert the order of themes in English: 'the muddied water is sweeter than the milk and honey.' That would have forfeited the syntactic suspense, the drama of the ending: 'muddied by animals'. To enact this *effect* of balancing and weighing, I also arranged the lines and spaces symmetrically so that 'is the leftover water in the land' is the midmost line set off by spaces.

The poem is a *kuṟiñci* piece, about the lovers' first union, set in the hillside landscape. My title ('What she said to her girl friend, when she returned from the hills') summarises the whole context (speaker, listener, occasion) from the old colophon that accompanies the poem. The poem speaks of the innocent young woman's discovery of sex, in the hills, with her man. The leaf-covered waterholes that animals muddy with their eager thirst become a tangible way of talking about sex. The contrast between the safe, 'cultured', garden of milk and honey (with overtones in English of the *Song of Songs*) and the wilder 'natural' hills with their animals guzzling at the waterholes is also a progression for the virginal speaker. It is a movement from culture to nature, also from innocence to experience, preferring the excited muddy water of adult eroticism to childhood's milk and honey. This progression is lost if we do not preserve the order of themes so naturally carried by the left-branching syntax of Tamil.

More could be said about it from the point of view of the old commentaries. For instance, the commentaries summarise the mood (*meyppāṭu*,

which significantly means 'bodily state') and the purpose of the poem. The mood here, they say, is one of 'great wonder' (*perumitam*): the purpose is 'to speak of life's goodness' (*vāḻkkai nalam kūṟutal*).

Now, this poem on lovers' first union is part of a series of ten with different speakers, moods and purposes. I shall cite only the very next poem in the series:

WHAT SHE SAID,

her lover within earshot

Tell me:
how is it then
that women gather
like hill goddesses

and stare at me
wherever I go,
and say
'She's good, she's so good,'

and I,
no good at all for my man
from the country of the hills?

Kapilar, *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu* 204 (Ramanujan 1985, 10)

The mood in this companion poem is 'sadness' (*aḻukai*, 'weeping'); the purpose is to 'persuade the lover to marry her'. So the poem's 'mood', as here, may have ulterior ends, adding a twist to the texture. As the title (summarised from the colophons) suggests, the poem is often addressed to one person but meant for someone else within earshot, as in a joint family. Such poetry is 'overheard' by us as well as by the personae that people the poems.

Thus poem follows poem, with the same paradigm of personae, details of landscape (hillside, in these ten), often the same phrases, but playing a different tune on the same strings, making a different figure, evoking a different mood within the same theme. The ten poems together make for a complex, psychologically nuanced, progressive enactment of a given conventional situation. Like Indian music, architecture, and much else in Indian culture, these poems develop a mood, a situation, a dwelling, a mode or *rāga*, by original recombinations, placements, and repetitions of a given set of motifs.

Furthermore, these ten poems in this anthology, *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu*, are part of a hundred on the theme of *kuṟiñci* (lover's union) by a single great poet, Kapilar. Indeed, even in other *akam* anthologies, he wrote about no other

landscape. And he is not the only poet to have written about it. All the poems of a landscape share the same set of images and themes, but use them to make truly individual designs and meanings. Now the five landscapes of *akam* ('interior' love poems) define each other. All the *akam* poems, in turn, contrast with *puṟam* ('exterior') poems, though they share the landscapes. The love poems get parodied, subverted, and played with in comic poems and poems about poems. In a few centuries, both the love poems and the war poems provide models and motifs for religious poems. Gods like Kṛṣṇa are both lovers and warriors. Human love as well as human politics and conflict become metaphors for man's relations with the divine. The relations of lover and beloved, poet and patron, bard and hero, get transposed, or translated if you will, to poet-saint and god.

Thus any single poem is part of a set, a family of sets, a landscape (one of five), a genre (*akam*, *puṟam*, comic, or religious). The intertextuality is concentric, a pattern of memberships as well as neighbourhoods, of likenesses and unlikenesses. Somehow a translator has to translate each poem in ways that suggest these interests, dialogues, and networks.

III

If attempting a translation means attempting such an impossibly intricate task, foredoomed to failure, what makes it possible at all? At least four things, maybe even four articles of faith, help the translator.

1. *Universals.* If there were no universals in which languages participate and of which all particular languages were selections and combinations, no language learning, translation, comparative studies or cross-cultural understanding of even the most meagre kind would be possible. If such universals did not exist, as Voltaire said of God, we would have had to invent them. They are at least the basic explanatory fictions of both linguistics and the study of literature. Universals of structure, in both signifiers (e.g., sound systems, grammar, semantics, rhetoric, and poetics) and the signifieds (e.g., what poems are about, such as love or war, and what they mean within and across cultures), are necessary fictions, the indispensable 'as ifs' of our fallible enterprise.

2. *Interiorised contexts.* However culture-specific the details of a poem are, poems like the ones I have been discussing interiorise the entire culture. Indeed, we know about the culture of the ancient Tamils only through a careful study of these poems. Later colophons and commentaries explore and explicate this knowledge carried by the poems, setting them in context, using them to make lexicons and charting the

fauna and flora of landscapes. The diagrams and charts I have used to explicate classical Tamil poetry (see Chap. 10, 'Form in Classical Tamil Poetry', above) are based on the earliest grammar of Tamil, *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest parts of which are perhaps as old as the third century. Such grammars draw on the poems themselves and codify their *dramatis personae*, an alphabet of themes, a set of situations that define where who may say what to whom, a list of favoured figures of thought and figures of speech, and so on. When one translates a classical Tamil poem, one is translating also this kind of intertextual web, the meaning-making web of colophons and commentaries that surround and contextualise the poem. Even when we disagree with them, they give us the terms in which we construct the argument against them. There is no illusion here of 'the poem itself'.

3. *Systematicity.* The systematicity of such bodies of poetry, the way figures, genres, personae, etc., intermesh in a master-code, is a great help in entering this intricate yet lucid world of words. One translates not single poems but bodies of poetry that create and contain their original world. Even if one chooses not to translate all the poems, one chooses poems that cluster together, that illuminate one another, so that allusions, contrasts, and collective designs are suggested. One's selection then be--comes a metonymy for their world, re-presenting it. Here intertextuality is not the problem, but the solution. One learns one's lessons here not only from the Tamil arrangements but from Yeats, Blake, and Baudelaire, who all used arrangement as a poetic device.

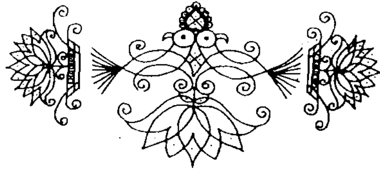
4. *Structural mimicry.* Yet, against all this background, the work of translating single poems in their particularity is the chief work of the translator. In this task, I believe, the structures of individual poems, the unique figures they make out of all the given codes of their language, rhetoric, and poetics, become the points of entry. The poetry and the significance reside in these figures and structures as much as in the untranslatable verbal textures. So one attempts a structural mimicry, to translate relations, not items—not single words but phrases, sequences, sentences; not metrical units but rhythms; not morphology but syntactic patterns.

To translate is to 'metaphor', to 'carry across'. Translations are transpositions, re-enactments, interpretations. Some elements of the original cannot be transposed at all. One can often convey a sense of the original rhythm, but not the language-bound metre; one can mimic levels of diction, but not the actual sound of the original words. Textures are harder

(maybe impossible) to translate than structures, linear order more difficult than syntax, lines more difficult than larger patterns. Poetry is made at all these levels—and so is translation. That is why nothing less than a poem can translate another.

Yet 'anything goes' will not do. The translation must not only represent, but *re*-present, the original. One walks a tightrope between the To-language and the From-language, in a double loyalty. A translator is an 'artist on oath'. Sometimes one may succeed only in *re*-presenting a poem, not in closely representing it. At such times one draws consolation from parables like the following. A Chinese emperor ordered a tunnel to be bored through a great mountain. The engineers decided that the best and quickest way to do it would be to begin work on both sides of the mountain, after precise measurements. If the measurements were precise enough, the two tunnels would meet in the middle, making a single one. 'But what happens if they don't meet?' asked the emperor. The counsellors, in their wisdom, answered, 'If they don't meet, we will have two tunnels instead of one.' So too, if the representation in another language is not close enough, but still succeeds in 'carrying' the poem in some sense, we will have two poems instead of one.

From Classicism to *Bhakti**



INTRODUCTION

In this paper we attempt some notes toward a chapter of Indian poetry—the transformation of classical Tamil genres into the genres of *bhakti*. Early *bhakti* movements, whether devoted to Śiva or Viṣṇu, used whatever they found at hand, and changed whatever they used—Vedic and Upaniṣadic notions; mythologies; Buddhism; Jainism; conventions of Tamil and Sanskrit poetry; early Tamil conceptions of love, service, women, and kings; folk religion and folksong; the play of contrasts between Sanskrit and the mother-tongue (see Ramanujan 1981, 103–69).

The Gupta period (fourth to sixth centuries) was not only the great classical period of Sanskrit literature, but also truly prepared the ground for the emergence of *bhakti*. For instance, the Gupta kings called themselves devotees of god (*bhāgavatas*). They took the names of the gods; put the figures of Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu's consort, and Varāha, his incarnation as a Boar, on their coins; made mythology a state concern, enlisting particularly Viṣṇu and his heroic incarnations for their politics. The Guptas sponsored Viṣṇu and believed almost that Viṣṇu sponsored the Gupta empire. Kṛṣṇa as a god with his own legends and cults emerged in the later Gupta period. Not only were the first Hindu temples built and the first Hindu icons sculpted during this period, but the official forms of Hindu mythology were set down in great syncretic texts called the *purāṇas*. By the fifth century, Viṣṇu, Śiva, their families, minions, and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties.

In South India, the Pallavas had arrived by the sixth century. Their inscriptions record the end of an era in South Indian history and the beginnings of a new one. In the culture of this time, the two 'classicisms' of India, that of the Guptas and that of Tamil classical poetry, seem to have

*With Norman Cutler.

met. Of the various elements mentioned earlier, we shall study in detail only one—the *puṟam* tradition of Tamil heroic poetry—and the way its conventions were transformed by the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* poets. After a few preliminary remarks on classical Tamil poetry, we shall look at one of the earliest poems on Viṣṇu in the *Paripāṭal*, a late classical anthology (fifth-sixth century); we then focus upon the poetry of the first three *āḻvārs* (*c.* sixth century) before we examine the work of Nammāḻvār (*c.* eighth-ninth century), the greatest of the Vaiṣṇava poet-saints; we close with remarks on the use of classical Tamil models in an influential theological work, the *Ācārya Hṛdayam* (*c.* thirteenth century). We have narrowed our story to early Tamil Vaiṣṇava poetry and to only one element of the classical Tamil heritage. Similar studies can be undertaken for other Tamil or Sanskritic elements and other poets (Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava) of the *bhakti* tradition (see Cutler 1980).

I. CLASSICAL TAMIL POETRY

A few elementary remarks (or reminders) about classical Tamil genres may be appropriate at the outset. *Caṅkam* or classical Tamil poetry is classified by theme into two kinds: poems of *akam* (the 'inner part' or the Interior) and poems of puṟam (the 'outer part' or the Exterior). *Akam* poems are love poems; *puṟam* poems are all other kinds of poems, usually about good and evil, action, community, kingdom; it is the 'heroic' and 'public' poetry of the ancient Tamils, celebrating the ferocity and glory of kings, lamenting the death of heroes, the poverty of poets. Elegies, panegyrics, invectives, poems on wars and tragic events are *puṟam* poems (see Ramanujan 1967 and 1985; also Chaps. 9–11 above).

The *Tolkāppiyam*, the most important expository text for the understanding of early Tamil poetry, distinguishes *akam* and *puṟam* conventions as follows: 'In the five phases of *akam*, no names of persons should be mentioned. Particular names are appropriate only in *puṟam* poetry.' The dramatis personae for *akam* are idealized types, such as chieftains representing clans and classes, rather than historical persons. Similarly, landscapes are more important than particular places.

The love of man and woman is taken as the ideal expression of the 'inner world', and *akam* poetry is synonymous with love poetry in the Tamil tradition. Love in all its variety—love in separation and in union, before and after marriage, in chastity and in betrayal—is the theme of *akam*. 'There are seven types of love, of which the first is *kaikkiḷai*, unrequited love, and the last is *peruntiṇai*, mismatched love.' Neither of

these extremes is the proper subject of *akam* poetry. The middle five represent well-matched love and divide its course, now smooth, now rough, into five kinds, moods, or phases: union, patient waiting, anxious waiting, separation from parents or lover, infidelity. Each mood or phase is paired with a landscape, which provides the imagery: hillside, wooded pastoral valley, seashore, wasteland, and fertile fields. The *bhakti* poets, however, 'revived' the *kaikkiḷai* genre in poems that express the anguish of the devotee who is separated from god.

Unlike *akam* poems, *puṟam* poems may mention explicitly the names of kings and poets and places. The poem is placed in a real society and given a context of real history. The *Tolkāppiyam* also divided the subject matter of *puṟam* poetry into seven types, but in this case all seven are of equal standing. The type called *pāṭāṉ* (elegy, praise for heroes, for gifts, invective) was very popular among classical *puṟam* poets, and somewhat transformed, it was equally popular among *bhakti* poets. Poeticians regarded *pāṭāṉ* as the *puṟam* equivalent of *kaikkiḷai* in *akam* poetry which also is well represented in the poetry of the saints.

II. THE HYMNS TO TIRUMĀL IN *PARIPĀṬAL*

By and large the poets of the *caṅkam* anthologies did not compose poems on religious themes. Though we find references to deities and we catch glimpses of ritual practices, rarely do these occur as the principal subject of a *caṅkam* poem.[1] However, there are two notable exceptions to this generalisation. The *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, one of the ten long songs, is a poem in honour of Murukaṉ, the Tamil god who, by the time of this poem, had coalesced with the Sanskrit Skanda, the warrior-son of Śiva and Pārvatī. This poem is composed in the form of an *āṟṟuppaṭai*, a genre which accounts for three other long poems among the ten (*Ciṟupāṇāṟṟuppaṭai*, *Perumpāṇāṟṟuppaṭai* and *Porunarāṟṟuppaṭai*) and for a number of shorter poems included in the *puṟam* anthologies. The setting of an *āṟṟuppaṭai* is a meeting between two bards, who apparently depended on the patronage of generous kings and chieftains for their survival. In an *āṟṟuppaṭai* one bard praises the liberality of his patron to the other and urges him to seek his livelihood by visiting the court of this generous ruler. In *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* the roles of the two bards are taken by an initiate in Murukaṉ's cult and a neophyte. The god is praised as a patron-king would be in other poems of this genre, but the gift he offers his suppliants is personal salvation instead of the food and wealth kings usually gave

to bards who sought their patronage. In the eleventh century, *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* was incorporated into the eleventh *Tirumuṟai* ('sacred arrangement') of the Tamil Śaivite canon.

We also find some moving devotional poems in *Paripāṭal*, one of the later *caṅkam* anthologies. Originally, this anthology, which takes its name from a poetic metre, included seventy poems dedicated to the gods Tirumāl (Viṣṇu), Cevvel (Murukaṉ) and the goddess, the river Vaiyai (presently known as Vaikai) and the ancient Pāṇṭiya capital Maturai which is situated on its banks. Only twenty-four poems have survived, however: seven to Tirumāl, eight to Cevvel, and nine of the Vaiyai poems. The seven poems to Tirumāl included in *Paripāṭal* are the only explicitly Vaiṣṇavite poems in the *caṅkam* corpus. Critics have suggested that *Paripāṭal*, *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai* and *Kalittokai*, an anthology of *akam* poems in the *kali* metre, belong to a later era than most of the other poems of the classical corpus. Zvelebil suggests 400–550 as a probable date for *Paripāṭal* (Zvelebil 1974, 50).

According to the *Tolkāppiyam*, love (*kāmam*) is the proper subject for poems composed in the *paripāṭal* metre, but in reality the poems of *Paripāṭal* deal with both *akam* and *puṟam* themes. The theme of love, treated in accord with the rules governing *akam* poetry, appears primarily in the Vaiyai poems. Many *puṟam* elements appear in the poems dedicated to the gods Cevvel and Tirumāl, but there they have been transformed to serve poetry which is simultaneously devotional and heroic.

The panegyric genre is the most visible feature shared by the Tirumāl poems in *Paripāṭal* and *puṟam* poetry. Somewhat artificially, the *Tolkāppiyam* subdivides the *puṟam* universe into seven sub-genres called *tiṇai*, and one of these, *pāṭāṉ tiṇai*, is the genre of 'praise'. A large portion of the poems included in the *puṟam* anthologies are classified under the heading *pāṭāṉ*, and even *puṟam* poems classified under other *tiṇais* often include words of praise for a warrior or a king. The *puṟam* world is a world of kings, chieftains, and heroic warriors. The classical poets, therefore, praised their patrons for their valour in combat and for their virtuous rule. Most of the Tirumāl poems in *Paripāṭal* are poems of praise for the god, and they display a number of the specific thematic 'situations' or *turai* which are characteristic of *puṟam* poetry. Thirteen of the eighteen *turai* which are treated in the *puṟam* anthology *Patiṟṟuppattu* are in one way or another related to the theme of praise, and many have direct counterparts in the poems to *Tirumāl* (Kailasapathy 1968, 195–96). Here is a list of the thirteen *turai*:

centuraippāṭāṉ pāṭṭu	poem in praise of hero's fame: in praise of might, mien and glory
iyaṉmoḻi vāḻttu	theme of extolling a hero by attributing to him all the noble deeds of his ancestors
vañcitturaippāṭāṉ pāṭṭu	poem in praise of invading warriors: king's wrath and praise of him
nāṭu vāḻttu	blessing the country: in praise of wealth and abundance in the land of the hero
vākaitturaippāṭāṉ pāṭṭu	Praise of victorious hero: victor wears *vākai* flowers and rejoices over vanquished
kaḷavaḻi	battle-ground: the theme of a minstrel praising the spoils of a victorious king in war
vākai	in praise of conqueror: the bard exalts victory leading to liberality
viṟalivāṟṟuppaṭai	directing a danseuse: directing a danseuse to a generous patron
kāṭci vāḻttu	praise of a sight: reaction on seeing either a great hero or a hero-stone, etc.
paricirruraippāṭāṉ pāṭṭu	praise of hero and request for largesse
pāṇāṟṟuppaṭai	directing a minstrel (lutanist): usually one minstrel directing another to a generous patron
mullai	hero's victory: praise of the hero including reference to his wife
kāvaṇmullai	praise of rule: extolling king's rule for providing shelter and security

We can almost say that all we need do is substitute the word 'god' wherever the word 'hero' or 'king' occurs in this list, and we end up with a list of thematic elements in the *Paripāṭal* hymns to Tirumāl. Themes such as praise of a hero's (god's) fame, praise of a victorious hero (god), and praise of a king (god) for providing shelter and security fall into this category. In other instances we find elements in the poems to Tirumāl which are analogues of *puṟam* elements. For example, *iyaṉmoḻi vāḻttu* is defined as the situation in which the hero is praised by attributing to him all the noble deeds of his ancestors. References to the heroic deeds Tirumāl-Viṣṇu performed in his various *avatāras* function in much the same way in *Paripāṭal*. The god's *avatāras*, if not an ancestral lineage in a literal sense, can be viewed as such in a metaphoric sense. Here the noble deeds of the god's 'ancestors' literally *are* his own deeds: he sets his own precedents.

In his excellent study of *puṟam* poetry Kailasapathy analyses a panegyric poem from one of the classical anthologies and identifies nine thematic units in the poem which, he tells his reader, 'are traditional and typical of the entire bardic poetry' (Kailasapathy 1968, 208). Kailasapathy's prose translation of the poem and his nine thematic units are given below:

> Worthy scion of those kings who ruled the whole world with undisputed wheel of command! The kingdom of your ancestors extended from the Comorin river in the south to the high mountain Himālayas in the north and from sea to sea in east and west. Their subjects wheresoever they lived—in hill, mountain, forest, or town—unanimously praised them. They eschewed evil and their sceptre was stainless; they took only what was due and were just and impartial. O warlike lord of Tonti! Your town is fenced by mountain; the white sand in its broad beaches shines like moonlight. There grow tall palms laden with bunches of coconuts. There are also extensive fields; and in the back waters flowers blossom which are like bright red flames. Even as a mighty and proud elephant contemptuous of the pit-hole whose mouth is cunningly overlaid, impetuously falls into it, and with its full-grown tusks gores the sides, fills it up with earth it has dug up, steps over and joins its loving herd, so you escaped because of your irresistible strength and now remain in your realm and among your kindred, who are extremely happy. Those defeated kings whose lands and precious jewels you captured, now feel that they could only regain them if they gained your sympathy; those who retook their lost possessions (while you were in captivity) now live in mortal fear of having provoked your fury; they feel certain of losing their forts surrounded by moats, encircling woods and thick walls atop of which fly their tall banners. Consequently, all these alien kings hasten to serve you. Such is your might and I come to praise it. O great one! The innumerable shields of your warriors vie with the mass of rain-clouds; large swarms of bees settle on your war-elephants, mistaking them for huge hills. Your large army—the nightmare of your foes—is vast as the ocean upon which the clouds drink; the sound of your war-drums resembles the roar of thunder which makes venomous snakes tremble and hang down their hooded heads. But great above all is your unlimited munificence. (*Puṟanāṉūṟu* 17)

Thematic Units

1. The extent of the king's domain.
2. Tonti, and its description.
3. Some aspects of the king's benign rule.
4. Reference to his illustrious ancestors.
5. The simile of an elephant escaping from a pit-trap.
6. The reactions of the king's foes.
7. Description of forts.
8. Description of the king's troops, elephants, etc.
9. His boundless munificence.

If we were to similarly analyse the hymns to Tirumāl in *Paripāṭal*, we should find that they display many of the same thematic units. In *Paripāṭal* 2, which appears as an addendum to this paper, we find at least strong hints of six of Kailasapathy's thematic units. The following description of Tirumāl's chest appears in the *Paripāṭal* poem:

Wearing jewels
many-coloured as rainbows
bent across the high heavens
on your chest, itself a jewel studded
with pearls, you always wear
the Red Goddess
as the moon
his shadow.

Immediately following this passage is another that makes 'reference to the king's ancestors'.

You as the Boar
with white tusks, sharp and spotted,
washed by the rising waves, lifted
and wed the Earth-maiden
so not a spot of earth
is ever troubled by the sea.

The recital of the god's mythic history can be regarded as a transformation of the thematic unit which appears in the *puṟam* poem. Here the god's ancestor, the Boar, is his own *avatāra*.

Following this is an extraordinary depiction of Viṣṇu in battle which brings to mind Kailasapathy's thematic units, the reactions of the king's foes, and description of the king's troops, elephants, etc. (Here it is not troops, but Tirumāl's potent weapons, the conch and the discus, that are described.)

O lord fierce in war,
the loud conch you hold
sounds like thunder

to the enemy
rising as one man,
unafraid in anger,
rising like a hurricane
to join battle;

banners break and fall,
ears go deaf,
crowns shiver on their heads,
and the earth loosens
under their feet

at the thunder of your conch.

O lord fierce in war,
the discus in your hand
cuts the sweet lives
of enemies;

heads fall and roll,
wreaths and all;
their stand lost,
like the tens of thousands
of bunches
on the heads of tall black palmyra-trees
not stripped yet
of root, branch,
frond or young fruit,
falling to the earth
all at once;

not one head
standing on its body,
beheaded all at one stroke, they
gather, roll, split,
come together and roll apart,
and lie dead at last
in a mire of blood.

That discus
that kills at one stroke;
Death is its body,
its colour the flame
of bright fire
when gold burns in it.

The similarity between this battle scene and another depicted in a poem from the *puṟam* anthology *Patiṟṟuppattu* is truly remarkable:

beheaded bodies, leftovers,
dance about
before they fall
to the ground;

blood glows,
like the sky before nightfall,
in the red center
of the battlefield

from *Patirruppattu* 35 (translated by A.K. Ramanujan)

The hymn to Tirumāl (*Paripāṭal* 2) celebrates the 'king's' benign rule and his boundless munificence.

If one looks for your magnificent patience
it's there, wide as earth;
your grace,
a sky of rain-cloud
fulfilling everyone.

And in another passage,

As soon as your heart
thought of ambrosia,
food of the gods,
the deathless ones received
a life without age,
a peace without end.

The poet's metaphorical description of Tirumāl's grace as 'a sky of rain-cloud' has many parallels in *puṟam* poetry where a king's generosity is frequently compared with the rain:

It was as if rain showered down
with thunder whose voice makes men tremble,
nourishing the forest
whose grass is burnt by the bright rays of the savage sun:
he gave rice and ghee and spicy meat.

from *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 160 (Hart 1979)

The association between generosity and rain is a strong one, especially in the Tamil area where, except for the three months of the unpredictable monsoon, water can be scarce. In the hymn to Tirumāl the metaphor is significant in yet another way, for Tirumāl's complexion is blue-black; he is often said to resemble a storm cloud. Sometimes he is even said to *be* the cloud that sends life-giving rain.[2] *Māl* or *māvōṉ*, literally means 'the dark one'. In Sanskrit he is *nīlameghaśyāma*, 'dark as a black cloud'.

Conspicuously absent from *Paripāṭal* 2 are references to sacred places which could be considered the counterparts of the king's domain, his capital and his forts in *puṟam* poetry. But these elements appear in other Vaiṣṇavite poems in the *Paripāṭal*. The fifteenth song is a eulogy of Māliruṅkuṉṟam, 'Māl's dark hill', which is located about twelve miles north of Maturai and even today is the site of a popular Viṣṇu temple known by the name Aḻakar Kōyil.[3] Unlike the other Tirumāl poems which are hymns of praise addressed directly to the god, in *Paripāṭal* 15 the poet extols the glories of Māliruṅkuṉṟam to a human audience:

This is the place where the lord
who wears garments of gold
stays with his brother
like a halo of cool sunbeams
shimmering around a core of darkness:

Think about it, mortals,
and listen—
fragrant blue lilies
blossom in all its ponds,
the branches of *aśoka* trees
growing at their edge
are covered with blossoms,

the colours of green fruit
and ripe fruit
play against one another
and bright clusters of buds
on the *kino* trees
burst into bloom:

the beauty of this place
is like the Black God himself.

You people
who have never gone there to worship,

gaze on that mountain and bow down:

the name Iruṅkuṉṟam
has spread far and wide,
on this great, bustling earth
it boasts fame in ages past
for it is the home of the dear lord
who eradicates delusions
for people who fill their eyes
with his image.

from *Paripāṭal* 15 (Cutler 1980)[4]

The poet praises Mālirunkunṟam, the most praiseworthy of all the earth's mountains, because it is the god's abode on earth. (The poem begins with an introduction to the many great mountains on earth, and then Māl's mountain is singled out as the most dazzling of all.) The eulogy of Tirumāl's locale reminds us of the *puṟam* poet's eulogy of his patron's country and its capital city. In particulars, however, this loving picture of Māl's dark mountain is more like an *akam* landscape. The *puṟam* poet does not usually linger over descriptions of nature. For him, the fertility of the countryside is useful primarily as a reflection of a hero's glory. But careful description of natural scenes lies at the very heart of *akam* poetry. Its interior drama of anonymous characters is bodied forth in the details of the scene and is set not in particular places, but in landscapes—the mountains, the forest, the seashore, the cultivated countryside, and the desert. Here, every landscape is a mood. In *Paripāṭal* 15 the poet evokes a mountain landscape by describing mountain pools and flowering plants (in the passage cited above), waterfalls and birds (in other passages), much as an *akam* poet would. However, here natural detail is not meticulously coordinated with the human psyche as in *akam* poetry. It is probably fair to say that Māl's dark mountain stands somewhere between the specific locales of *puṟam* poetry and an *akam* landscape.

The thematic units which link the Tirumāl poems in *Paripāṭal* with other classical Tamil poems do not in themselves constitute a complete profile of these early Tamil hymns to Viṣṇu. The authors of these poems relied a great deal upon classical Tamil sources, but they also received influences from other quarters. *Paripāṭal* 2 opens with a stirring account of the earth's creation which, but for its language, could have been lifted straight out of a purāṇic cosmology. Later in the same poem we come upon a very striking passage which, detail for detail, identifies Tirumāl with the Vedic sacrifice. In these poems we also find descriptions of Tirumāl which are addressed to the god himself. While the *puṟam* panegyric is the Tamil prototype for this element in the *Paripāṭal* hymns, one is also reminded of Vedic hymns where descriptions *of* gods are addressed *to* the gods themselves. In *Paripāṭal* such descriptions can be divided into two kinds. The first kind is physical and iconographic, as in *Paripāṭal* 1 where the poet salutes Tirumāl:

Lord with eyes the colour of flowers
red as fire,
with body the colour
of an open *pūvai* blossom,

Tiru rests upon your chest
and fulfills her desire,
  your chest adorned
  with a sparkling jewel,

clothed in garments of gold,
your body is like a dark mountain
surrounded by flames.

  from *Paripāṭal* 1 (Cutler 1980)

The second kind, a quasi-philosophical description of the god, closely follows an Upaniṣadic pattern. Here philosophy is grounded not so much in logic as in aesthetics; it is both idea and experience, a description of the lord's ubiquity as well as its celebration:

Your heat and your radiance are found in the sun,
your coolness and your beauty in the moon,
your graciousness and your generosity are found in the clouds,
your protective nature and your patience in the earth,

your fragrance and your brightness are found in the *pūvai* blossom,
the form you manifest and your expansiveness appear in the waters,
your shape and the sound of your voice in the sky:

all these things—near, far, in-between
  and everything else,
detach themselves from you, the source of protection,
and rest in your embrace.

  from *Paripāṭal* 4 (Cutler 1980)

Such passages show that the authors of the *Paripāṭal* poems, perhaps the earliest devotional poems in Tamil, were heirs to two classicisms. In these poems Vedic and Tamil bardic traditions meet and interweave to form a distinctly Tamil devotional poetry.

III. *PUṞAM* INFLUENCES IN THE POETRY OF THE 'FIRST THREE ĀḺVĀRS'

The hymns to Tirumāl in *Paripāṭal* are devotional poems, but they are not sacred poems in the same sense as the poetry of the twelve Tamil Vaiṣṇavite saints, the *āḻvārs*. *Paripāṭal* certainly extends the classical literary universe into the realm of devotion—but its classical associations have always overshadowed their devotional subject in the minds of

Tamil audiences. Proof of this is easy enough to find: *Paripāṭal* is counted as one of the eight anthologies of *cankam* poetry, and the hymns to Tirumāl were not canonised with the *ālvārs*' poems.[5]

By most estimates the first three *āḻvārs*, Poykai, Pūtam and Pēy, who are collectively called 'the first three' (*mutal mūvar*) in Tamil, lived some time during the sixth century. They, therefore, lived not much later than the *Paripāṭal* poets, but their poems are very different in form and effect. Each of the early *āḻvārs* is credited with an *antāti* of one hundred verses in the *veṇpā* metre, a metre which was also used by the authors of the didactic works often grouped together as the *patiṉeṉ kilkannakku*, the so-called 'eighteen minor works' which date from about the same time. When we turn to the poems of the first three *āḻvārs* after reading *cankam* poetry, we immediately sense that we are dealing with a different poetic sensibility. *Cankam* poetry is, by this time, a classical literature, part of a poet's learning. Only an audience well-schooled in classical literary conventions could have understood these poems composed in a language far from the language of everyday speech. The *bhakti* poets, on the other hand, used an idiom which must have been close to the Tamil spoken during their time; they make a point of it. The work which has been accorded the highest place of honour in Tamil Vaiṣṇavite canonical literature, Nammāḻvār's *Tiruvāymoḻi*, literally means 'the sacred spoken word' (*vay*, 'mouth' + *moḻi*, 'language'). Māṇikkavācakar's *Tiruvācakam*, a Śaivite text of equal renown, bears a name derived from Sanskrit *vāc*, 'speech'. *Bhakti* poetry is also poetry for performance. Tamil Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites regularly recite the hymns of the saints in their homes, and at least since the tenth century, the hymns have been recited in the major temples of Tamilnadu (Nilakanta Sastri 1955, 637, 639).

Unlike classical poetry, the poetry of the saints is a 'personal' poetry, though they too use personae or masks. In *akam* poetry the personality of the poet is almost completely effaced by internal narrators and a conventional poetic vocabulary. Only in *puṟam* poems do we often understand the narrating voice to be the poet's own, but still only a few of these do the poets ever tell us much about themselves in their poems.[6] Even the *Paripāṭal* hymns to Tirumāl, which follow the panegyric model, tell us a great deal about the god, but not much about the poet who eulogises him. The early *āḻvārs* were more inclined to leave traces of their personalities in their poems, even while following panegyric models. One *āḻvār* is not like another.

As Zvelebil points out, the *pāṭāṉ* genre, or the poem of praise, continued to be an influential model for the saint-poets (Zvelebil 1974, 93–94). He condenses the parallels between the classical panegyric and the poetry of the saints in the following scheme:

The bardic poet's praise of the patron; he asks for gifts; the patron grants him gold, etc.; rarely, but still, the poet scolds the patron for his wretched and miserly attitude.	The poet-saint's praise of Śiva or Viṣṇu; he asks for knowledge of himself and of God; God grants him knowledge, grace, redemption; rarely, but still, the saint blames and reproaches God for his misfortunes.

This scheme is a useful one, for it relates two bodies of Tamil poetry, but the saints' poems do not all fit neatly into this scheme. We find in the poetry of the saints many poems that are not addressed directly to a god. Not all *puṟam* poems are addressed to a patron. Often the *bhakti* poet speaks about his lord to an audience who is either explicitly invoked or whose presence must be inferred. The voice of the saint is the pivot on which these poems turn, and this voice is given flesh and blood in the saint's sacred biography which is as well known as his poems: Tamil Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites hear the life-stories of the saints in their poems.[7] In this poem by Poykai, for example, we overhear the poet talking to Viṣṇu about the best-known event in the composite biography of the first three *āḻvārs*.[8]

Lord who lifted a mountain to block the driving rain,

in this beloved town of Kōval
you neither departed through the gate
nor came inside,
but chose to stay, together with your goddess,
here in this entrance hall.

Mutal Tiruvantāti 86 (Cutler 1980)

Poykai, Pūtam and Pēy were early voices in the evolution of a personal poetry of devotion in Tamil. If *Paripāṭal* represents an extension of classical Tamil poetry, the *antātis* of the first three *āḻvārs* represent the beginning of a new kind of Tamil poetry. Not surprisingly, the classical influences are not pervasive in the poems of the early Vaiṣṇavite saints. Nevertheless, many verses display or extend classical motifs and techniques. Pēy envisions Viṣṇu as a mighty warrior who looks after his devotees' well-being:

The victorious lord
who wields eight invincible weapons,
the eight-armed lord
who aimed his wheel
and cut down the crocodile-monster in the pond,[9]

is our refuge
down to the soles of his feet.

Munram Tiruvantāti 99 (Cutler 1980)

Whenever Viṣṇu is invoked as protector and hero we detect resonances of the bards' eulogies of their patrons. Here the heroic mode has become a signifier for devotion, as in this poem by Poykai:

My mouth praises no one but the lord,
my hands worship no one but the lord
who bounded over the world,
my ears hear no name, my eyes see no form
but the name and form of the lord
who made a meal of the poison he sucked
from the she-devil's breast.

Mutal Tiruvantāti 11 (Cutler 1980)

The *caṅkam* bard commends himself to the liberality of his patron, and similarly Poykai implies that he gives himself over to Viṣṇu without reservation. We sense that Viṣṇu is more than capable of protecting Poykai from his enemies. After all, didn't he destroy the she-demon Putanasura when he was only an infant? For the *āḻvār*, devotion takes the form of incessant contemplation of Viṣṇu's heroism.

IV. *PUṞAM* ELEMENTS IN NAMMĀḺVĀR'S POETRY

Nammāḻvār's position in Tamil Vaiṣṇavite tradition is a special one. The Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* equated his Tamil poems with the four Vedas, and the poems of the other *āḻvārs* with the 'limbs' (*aṅgas*) and 'subsidiary limbs' (*upaṅgas*) of the Vedas. The other *āḻvārs* are described as *aṅgas* for Nammāḻvār who is their *aṅgi* (one who possesses limbs). Tradition also accords Nammāḻvār a critical role in the story of the canonisation of the *āḻvārs'* hymns.[10] The personal voice which we begin to hear in the compositions of the early saints comes to maturity in Nammāḻvār's poems.

Nammāḻvār was a prolific poet—his greatest work *Tiruvāymoḻi* alone contains over one thousand verses—and thus there is considerable scope for variety in the saint's poems. Multiple strands of influence come together in Nammāḻvār's poetry, as in the *bhakti* tradition as a whole. In *Tiruvāymoḻi* love poetry, mythology, philosophy and heroic poetry alternate with one another and blend together in new ways. A great deal has already been written about Nammāḻvār's use of *akam* conventions, but commentators on *Tiruvāymoḻi* and Nammāḻvār's other poems have not paid nearly as much attention to the significant *puṟam* elements in the saint's poetry.[11] The following poem about Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā is as graphic as the battle scene from *Paripāṭal* 2 and draws as freely on the imagery of battle:

Crowding each other
face to face
as the arrows sang
and jangled

demon-carcasses fell
in hundreds

rolled over
like hills
the sea stained with blood
backed upstream into the rivers

when our Lord and Father
ravaged the island

and left it
a heap of ash

Tiruvāymoḻi 7.4.7 (Ramanujan 1981, 10)

Nammāḻvār also eulogised places sacred to Viṣṇu in a manner that calls to mind the *puṟam* poets' songs of praise for the lands ruled by their patrons. The saint composed a set of ten verses in praise of Viṣṇu's abode at Māliruṅcolai ('Māl's dark grove'), the same site near Maturai known to the *Paripāṭal* poet as Māliruṅkuṉṟam ('Māl's dark hill'). Nammāḻvār may well have composed these verses as a *bhakti* equivalent to the classical *āṟṟuppaṭai* or 'guide to patrons'.

Casting off the strong bonds of deeds,
wandering in search of salvation,
reaching the magnificent temple
on the mountain, veiled in clouds
at Māl's dark grove,
home of the lord who lifted a great mountain,

that is real strength.

To gather strength,
turn from evil deeds
and travel to the temple
on the mountain, surrounded by clear pools
at Māl's dark grove,
the temple of the lord
who upholds virtue with his wheel,

that is real skill.

Tiruvāymoli 2.10.4–2.10.4–5 (Cutler 1980)

Here Nammālvār encourages his audience to travel to Viṣṇu's temple at Māliruṅcolai, much as the *puram* poet urges other bards to travel to the court of his patron where they are sure to receive food and other gifts. But the *bhakti* poems differ from the classical *ārruppaṭai* in at least one important way. An *ārruppaṭai* documents a conversation between two bards at a specific point in time, and the noble deeds of the patron-hero are deemed historical events. Nammālvār's poems celebrate a god-hero who performs noble deeds in mythic time, no less real than historical time; and because they do not particularise their audience, they are immediately relevant to all audiences. The virtue of pilgrimage to Viṣṇu's sacred places is universal in its appeal.

The *puram* influences in Nammālvār's poetry are not confined solely to poems which are directly descended from *puram* prototypes. Images of Viṣṇu the warrior-hero appear in many and varied contexts. They often appear as telescoped references to particular incidents in the god's mythology. One favourite episode is the story of Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā. Another is Kṛṣṇa's betrothal to the cowherd maiden Pinnai: Kṛṣṇa won Pinnai for his bride by subduing seven of her father's bulls in a bull-baiting contest.[12] The following poem, which gives us a glimpse of the intimate sparring which the *bhakti* poet and his lord sometimes engage in, includes allusions to both these incidents:

Lord burning bright as a lamp
who conquered seven bulls
and turned splendid Laṅkā to ashes,

don't trust me!

When I reach your feet of gold
don't let me run off again.

Tiruvāymoli 2.9.10 (Cutler 1980)

Puram images also slip into poems that are directly descended from *akam* love poetry. Almost one-third of the verses in *Tiruvāymoli* take over the situations and characters of *akam* poetry, only here the *ālvār* is traditionally identified with the narrative voices of the heroine, her mother and her girl friend (three of the conventional character-narrators of *akam* poetry) and the hero, who does not take a speaking role in Nammālvār's love poems, as he does in classical *akam* poetry, is identified as Viṣṇu.[13] These two poems, the words of the heroine's mother, include the ubiquitous allusion to Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā.

WHAT HER MOTHER SAID

Like a bar of lac
or wax
thrust into fire
her mind is in peril
and you are heartless.

What shall I do for you,
lord who smashed Laṅkā,
land ruled by the demon?

Night and day her peerless eyes
swim in tears,
lord who turned Laṅkā's fortune into smoke,
don't scorch this simple girl
or make her gentle glances wither.

Tiruvāymoli 2.4.3, 2.4.10 (Cutler 1980)

By virtue of the heroic deed they allude to, the epithets in these poems bring to mind *puram* themes, but they function within the poems very much like the suggestive insets of nature images in *akam* poetry. The *akam* poets devised subtle, implied comparisons (called *ullurai*: 'inner statement') between events in nature and a drama of human characters, and in the saints' poems mythological allusions sometimes function in a similar manner. In these verses Nammālvār implies that Viṣṇu, the lover, can save the love-lorn heroine as he saved Sītā from the demon Rāvaṇa, or, by neglecting her, he can destroy her utterly as he demolished Rāvaṇa's kingdom, Laṅkā. In 2.4.10 the connection is reinforced by the images of burning which join purport and vehicle in the implied simile.

V. *AKAM* TRADITION AND *BHAKTI* POETRY

The two great classical Tamil gods, Ceyon, the Red One (Murukan), and Mayon, the Dark One (Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa) are lovers and warriors. One

presided over the hills, the other over wooded pasture-land. They were the gods of both *akam* and *puṟam* milieus (Zvelebil, 1977). *Bhakti* poets are direct inheritors of this erotic/heroic ambience and its poetic genres.

The *akam* tradition runs deep in Tamil *bhakti* poetry. This is generally recognised by traditional and modern scholars, and if we have mainly attended to *puṟam* threads in the saints' poems, it is only to redress the balance. A strong *akam* strain appears in Tamil devotional poetry a little later than the *puṟam*. *Tirumurukāṟṟuppaṭai*, which may be the earliest devotional poem in Tamil, is a direct outgrowth of a *puṟam* genre. As we have seen, the poems to Tirumāl in *Paripāṭal* contain many *puṟam* elements, but *akam* and *puṟam* elements are mixed together in the *Paripāṭal* poems to Cevvel (another name for Murukaṉ), who appears in this text both as a warrior god and as the lover of Valli, the mountain-maid who became his consort. Murukaṉ's love affair with Valli evolves in much the same way as the affairs of *akam* lovers, beginning with clandestine meetings on the mountain slopes.

In these late classical poems the characters, situations and images of *akam* poetry are absorbed into Murukaṉ's mythology. In *puṟam* poetry the *bhakti* poets found an ideal language to express the devotional idiom of master and servant, as they found in *akam* the idiom of lover and beloved. We find touches of *akam* influence in the poems of the early *āḻvārs*, but in the works of later Vaiṣṇavite poets such as Tirumankai and Nammāḻvār we find poems dominated by an *akam* vocabulary. Nammāḻvār most clearly displays the imprint of classical Tamil love poetry in his *Tiruviruttam*, a poem of one hundred verses, and in the two hundred and seventy love poems of the *Tiruvāymoḻi*, the so-called *akapporuḷ* portion of the text. These verses are precisely keyed to the conventions of *akam* poetry, and in most, Viṣṇu is cast in the role of the *akam* hero. It is almost paradoxical that Nammāḻvār, a poet who puts so much of himself into his poems, should draw so heavily upon the *akam* tradition, because in classical *akam* poetry the poet is completely concealed from his audience by the veils of internal narrators and an elaborate repertoire of conventional situations and images. Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators, however, attempted to neutralise the distance separating poet from poem in this genre by identifying Nammāḻvār with the female character-narrators, especially with the heroine to whom they gave the name Parāṅkuśa Nāyaki.[14] (And in so doing they violate one of the fundamental principles of *akam* poetry—that its characters are never named.) According to this influential interpretation, Nammāḻvār's love poems document the poet's own

love affair with god. Thus in the following poem, which describes a situation which is very familiar to the audience of *akam* poetry—the heroine is languishing in separation from the hero—we are said to hear how Nammāḻvār suffers when he is left alone without Viṣṇu's support.

WHAT SHE SAID

Evening has come,
    but not the Dark One.

Without him here,
    what shall I say?
    how shall I survive?

The bulls,
their bells jingling,
have mated with the cows
and the cows are frisky.

The flutes play cruel songs,
    bees flutter in the bright
        white jasmine
    and the blue-black lily.

The sea leaps into the sky
    and cries aloud.

Tiruvāymoḻi 9.9.10 (Ramanujan 1981, 32)

In *bhakti* a whole poetic tradition is taken over as a signifier for a new signification. Here *bhakti* is the new signification, and classical poetry, like Vedic and Upaniṣadic concepts, *purāṇa* mythologies, folk motifs and the many other sources from which the *bhakti* poets gathered their materials, is its signifier. An example will make this clear. Here is a classical Tamil poem:

These fat *koṉṟai* trees
are gullible:

    the season of rains
    that he spoke of
    when he went through the stones
    of the desert
    is not yet here

    though these trees
    mistaking the untimely rains

have put out
their long arrangements of flowers
on the twigs

as if for a proper monsoon.

Kōvaṭattaṉ, *Kuṟuntokai* 66 (Ramanujan 1967, 44)

And here is what Nammāḻvār does with it. He follows the classical score closely, yet transposes it to a new key:

They haven't flowered yet,
the fat *koṉṟai* trees,
nor hung out their garlands
and golden circlets
in their sensual canopy of leaves
along the branches,

dear girl,
dear as the paradise of our lord
who measured the earth
girdled by the restless sea:

they are waiting
with buds
for the return
of your lover
once twined in your arms.

Tiruviruttam 68 (Ramanujan 1981, 66)

In the earlier poem, the flowering tree, the rain, the anxious beloved, etc., were the signifiers for the erotic mood of waiting (*mullai*). In the later poem, the entire erotic tradition has become a new signifier, with *bhakti* as the signified. Now the classical tradition is to *bhakti* what the erotic motifs are to the tradition.

SIGNIFIER$_1$ (rain, flowering tree, etc.)	SIGNIFIED$_1$ (the erotic mood/*akam*)	
SIGNIFIER$_2$ (the entire erotic tradition)		SIGNIFIED$_2$ (*bhakti*)

Or, we can speak of 'framing' the erotic poem in a new context of *bhakti*—in *Tiruviruttam* 68 above, 'framing' is achieved by the presence of a reference to paradise and the lord who measured the earth. Past traditions and borrowings are thus re-worked into *bhakti*: they become materials, signifiers for a new signification, as a bicycle seat becomes a bull's head in Picasso. Often the listener/reader moves between the original material and the work before him—the double vision is part of the poetic effect (Ramanujan 1981).

VI. THE TAMIL CLASSICS AND VAIṢṆAVA THEOLOGY

Nammāḻvār's *akapporuḷ* poems may represent a peak in the history of classical influence in Tamil Vaiṣṇavite tradition, but they do not represent its end. Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators developed elaborate allegorical interpretations of the *āḻvārs*' love poems.[15] Aḻakiyamaṇavāḷaperumāḷnāyaṉār, the author of *Ācārya Hṛdayam*, a theological work of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, develops a theological interpretation for every detail in the *akapporuḷ* verses of *Tiruvāymoḻi*.[16] Even the heroine's ornaments carry an allegorical meaning in this interpretation. The commentator's mode of exegesis is a secondary signification system (see Barthes 1968). In his discussion of the heroine's physical characteristics, for example, he isolates a number of metaphors which Nammāḻvār and other poets often include in their descriptions of the *akam* heroine. From the quality which binds purport to vehicle in each of these metaphors, he develops a theological interpretation. In this way, the commentator takes over the poet's metaphorical identification of the heroine's forehead with the moon as a signifier for the purity of the soul. We may envisage the interpretive process as follows:

SIGNIFIER$_1$ (moon)	SIGNIFIED$_1$ (forehead)	
SIGNIFIER$_2$ (lustre)		SIGNIFIED$_2$ (soul's purity)

The commentator thus uses the signs of *bhakti* poetry to generate theological discourse.

The *akam* dimension of Nammāḻvār's poetry receives far more attention in *Ācārya Hṛdayam* than the *puṟam*, but the latter is not overlooked altogether. The author also develops the idea that Viṣṇu presides over the universe as a king presides over his realm. He equates the traditional five functions of the king with the five aspects of Viṣṇu that are discussed in Pāñcarātra āgamic literature (Damodaran 1976, 96).[17] The five functions of the king are equated with the five aspects of Viṣṇu as follows:

1. The king reigns in state on his throne surrounded by the insignia of royalty.	1. The lord reigns in heaven (*paramapada*) in his *para* aspect.
2. The king circulates among his subjects incognito during the night.	2. The lord dwells within all creatures in his *antaryāmin* aspect even though they may not be aware of his presence.
3. The king consults with advisors and deliberates how best to maintain the welfare of his subjects.	3. The lord reclines upon the snake Ananta in the milk-ocean and contemplates how to best sustain his devotees in his *vyūha* aspect.[18]
4. The king hunts wild animals.	4. The lord comes to earth in his *vibhava* (*avatāra*) aspect and destroys demons.
5. The king relaxes in his pleasure garden.	5. The lord stays in temples on hills and in forested areas such as Tiruvenkatam in his *arca* aspect.

While it is true that classical Tamil *puṟam* poetry is a poetry of kings, heroes, and warfare, Aḻakiyamaṇavāḷapperumāḷnāyaṉār's discussion of Viṣṇu's kingly attributes is guided by discussions of a king's duties found in Sanskrit *śāstras*, but blended with classical Tamil conceptions. In this respect Śrīvaiṣṇava exegetical tradition is like the poetry it purports to explain: like the *āḻvārs*, the *ācāryas* were heirs to two classicisms, Sanskrit and Tamil.

The transposition from poetry to theology takes the same form as the earlier transposition from classicism to *bhakti*. It keeps the signifiers, transposes them to another level, and writes them with new signified elements. In *bhakti* poetry, both signifier and signified are 'experiential', their relation is poetic. In the theological commentary, the signified has become abstract, and the relation between signifier and signified is allegorical. In this theological allegory, the love-lorn girl's messenger-bird is really the *guru* who mediates and relates her to god; her mother is no mother, but the soul's 'conviction in the right means', her hips and breasts are no longer erogenous and of the flesh, they are but the soul's attainment of *bhakti* and the lord's enjoyment of the soul.

With this commentator we are in the thirteenth century. The saints' poems are a permanent part of the Hindu religious scene. They live on, in all their full-bodied beauty and devotional power, subject of sect and temple politics, of allegory and ingenious commentary, of ritual and festival; they are also the moving resource of singers, thinkers, poets and

ordinary men. The saint as man speaking to god as beloved and protégé, offering Him his interior *akam* and exterior *puṟam*, is at the same time, in the same words, a poet in a tradition, a 'man speaking to men'. His past gives him a language for the present.

APPENDIX

HYMN TO TIRUMĀL (VIṢṆU)

When the sun and the moon,
given to alterations
from the oldest times
went out,

and the fresh golden world above
and the earthen one
were ruined:

there were ages of absence
even of sky
rolling time after time;

sound was born first
in the first age of sheer sky—
womb of every growing germ
though yet without forms,

then the ancient age of winds
driving all things before them,

the age of red fire
in flames,

the age of mist and cool rain
falling,

and when all four elements
drowned in the old flood,
the particles of earth
lay there,

recovering their own
natures, getting themselves
together;

then came the age of great earth
lying potential
in them all;

beyond the times counted
    in millions, billions, trillions,
    quadrillions and zillions,

came the time of the Boar
    that raised the earth
    from the waters
    and let it flourish;

knowing that it is only one
    of your Acts,

no one really can know
    the true age
    of your antiquity;

O First One, Lord of the Wheel,
    we bow,
    we sing your praise.

O you,
to those who say
you're younger, and brother
to the conch-coloured One,
you appear young;

to those who say
you're older
than the one dressed
in clothes dark as all-burying darkness
with a gold palmyra for banner,
you appear older;

in the wisdom of the ancients
sifted by the high ones
with flawless intent,
you're in a state of in-between;

yet in any search
of things one can see
in this state or that,
you show only your own,
the excellence
of your most ancient state.

Wearing jewels
many-coloured as rainbows
bent across the high heavens
on your chest, itself a jewel studded

with pearls, you always wear
the Red Goddess
as the moon
his shadow.

Which doesn't agree at all
with those who read the Vedas
and say,
        You as the Boar,
with white tusks, sharp and spotted,
washed by the rising waves, lifted
and wed the Earth-maiden

so not a spot of earth
is ever troubled by the sea.

O lord fierce in war,
the loud conch you hold
sounds like thunder

to the enemy
rising as one man,
unafraid in anger,
rising like a hurricane
to join battle;

banners break and fall,
ears go deaf,
crowns shiver on their heads,
and the earth loosens
under their feet

at the thunder of your conch.

O lord fierce in war,
the discus in your hand
cuts the sweet lives
of enemies:

heads fall and roll,
wreaths and all;
their stand lost,
like the tens of thousands
of bunches
on the heads of tall black palmyra-trees
not stripped yet

of root, branch
frond or young fruit,
falling to the earth
all at once:

not one head
standing on its body,
beheaded all at one stroke, they
gather, roll, split,
come together and roll apart,
and lie dead at last
in a mire of blood.

That discus
that kills at one stroke:
Death is its body, its colour the flame
of bright fire
when gold burns in it.

Yours is the lustre
of the great dark blue-sapphire;

your eyes, a pair
of famed lotuses;

the truth of your word
certain as the returning day.

If one looks for your magnificent patience
it's there, wide as earth;

your grace,
a sky of rain-cloud
fulfilling everyone;
so say

the sacred texts
of the learned brāhmaṇs,

O lord with the red-beak
Garuda-bird
on your banner,

you're like all that
and also like all else,
you're in these,
and in all things.

As said in the Vedas:
in the sacrificer's word,

in the sacrificial pillar
built step by step,

and also in the seizing
of the sacrificial animal
strapped to that pillar,

the kindling of a raging fire
according to charted text
and famous tradition,

and in the building of that fire
to glowing light
and prosperous flame

is your form,
your food:

in such,
brāhmaṇs see
(and even aliens agree)
your presence.

As soon as your heart
thought of ambrosia,
food of the gods,
the deathless ones received
a life without age,
a peace without end;

O lord unfathomable,
at your feet
we bow,
clean of heart,
putting our heads to the ground
over and over we bow,
we praise,
we celebrate

and we ask O lord
with our dear ones around us
we ask:

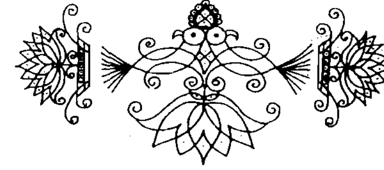
May our knowing
know
only what is.

Kīrantaiyār, The Second Song, *Paripāṭal*
(translated by A.K. Ramanujan)

III

Essays on *Bhakti* and Modern Poetry

Introduction by John B. Carman



This is an introduction to a series of 'introductions'—an impossible task, for Ramanujan does not provide a number of abstract generalisations that can be recounted or further compressed. He introduces by example and like a skilled preacher is able to reflect the whole world of a text within the 'eye' of a single verse, and sometimes to go beyond the whole text to a larger tradition and even to the global world of many-cultured humanity. Behind the essayist and analyst of religious and linguistic structures is the translator, constantly aware of both the elasticity and the fragility of language.

I find three strands in Ramanujan's essays on *bhakti*, at times clearly distinguished and at other times exhibited in their interconnection. The first is the sharp 'cutting edge' of *bhakti*, studied primarily in the Kannada free-verse 'utterances' (*vacanas*) of the Vīraśaiva saints. The second is the yearning for and celebration of the ultimate connection with god, studied most intensively in the Tamil Vaiṣṇava hymns of Nammāḻvār. The third is the development of a typology of *bhakti* saints as they are presented in a wide range of stories in many languages. In the first two essays included in this Section ('On Women Saints' and 'Men, Women, and Saints'), these strands are clearly distinguished. In the next three essays ('The Myths of *Bhakti*,' 'Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle,' and 'Varieties of *Bhakti*'), they are in various ways connected.

In what order should these strands by presented? Ramanujan was working on all these topics for many years before publishing anything, and a clear logical priority is as unclear as a chronological one. In arranging the essays in the order indicated above, and in reading them alongside the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva* (1973), the individual introductions to the four poets in that book, and the Afterword to *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), I follow the Indian metaphor of strands of a rope to return at

the end of my Introduction to the first strand, but looked at from a different perspective.

INCISIVE *BHAKTI*

Ramanujan begins his Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva* with his translation of one of Basavaṇṇa's poems, which ends with the memorable lines, 'things standing shall fall, / but the moving ever shall stay.' The Kannada verse uses the Sanskrit words for standing (*sthāvara*) and moving (*jaṅgama*) which had also become technical terms for the standing temple and the moving ascetic. The translator is able to suggest a paradoxical reversal of our notions of stability and a radical attack on all forms of 'establishment'. The temple establishment is here attacked through one of its own most profound metaphors: the shape of a human body. The revolutionary character of *bhakti* is expressed in this essay again and again with the striking metaphors of the Vīraśaiva saints.

The unpleasant sharpness of *bhakti* as a personal experience is brought out in another verse of Basavaṇṇa's in which *bhakti* is compared with a saw ('it cuts when it goes // and it cuts again / when it comes') and with a cobra's bite (*Speaking of Śiva*, 79; Basavaṇṇa 212). Not only does it hurt terribly, it may be deadly. The Vīraśaiva emphasis on painful change and upheaval may be a metaphor for transformation, but this illuminating wisdom that knocks the props out from under our conventional arrangement of the world around us is not merely spiritual, for it has drastic and often painful effects on the individual person and on the social body. It may, moreover, have shattering effects on the representation and 'housing' of the divine presence. The attack on both elite and popular notions of god's body in image and temple is central to this kind of *bhakti*, and is a striking contrast to the side of *bhakti* presented in the Afterword to *Hymns for the Drowning*.

The conclusion of the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva* provides a wonderful transition to the Afterword to *Hymns for the Drowning*: not the prose of the editor but the poetry of the translator conveys Dasareśwara's 'loving-kindness towards all creation.' Mercy that is 'light / as a dusting brush / of peacock feathers: // such moving, such awareness / is love that makes us one / with the Lord / Dasareśwara' (*Speaking of Śiva*, 55).

EMBODIED *BHAKTI*

With a humorous smile, Ramanujan reported to me once the reaction of an Indian reviewer of *Hymns for the Drowning*: 'He thought the Afterword an unnecessary addition to the poems.' I was appalled at the reviewer's

failure to recognise what I consider one of the finest general essays on *bhakti*, but I suspect Ramanujan was amused and also confirmed in his view that translation of poetry is more important than prose commentary. Not only does he entitle his comments an 'Afterword', but as in the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva*, he speaks as much as possible through the words of the poems themselves. What he presents restates some of the points made in the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva*; it also builds on his earlier studies of the classical Tamil poetry that provided models for the Tamil poet saints, both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva. Commenting on one of the earliest Tamil *bhakti* poems, the invocation of Lord Murukan̲, Ramanujan says in the Afterword:

> The poem evokes the primal . . . experience of *bhakti* . . . an embodiment; neither a shamanic flight . . . nor a yogic autonomy . . . but a partaking of the god . . . [A] bhakta needs to possess him and be possessed by him. He needs also to sing, to dance; to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture; to embody him in every possible way. (115–16)

This is a devotion of image-making rather than image-breaking, inclusion rather than excision, of passionate love towards one of the multiple embodiments of the One.

Ramanujan's selection from Nammāl̲vār's verses in *Hymns for the Drowning* begins with Tiruvāymol̲i 1.1.4, and in the middle of his Afterword, he gives a brilliant analysis of this verse that shows how he could turn a bewildering collection of Tamil personal pronouns into a succinct poetic summary of early Vaiṣṇava metaphysics. 'The *sentence* speaks of the one proliferating into the many; but in the way it begins and ends, the *poem* moves from the many to the one—as if the two opposite aspects are the same. The enfolding and the unfolding are the same thing seen from different directions.' Not all is process, however. 'Within all this teeming process is a central stasis . . . though he has become, and is, all of the things mentioned, he is not them—he "stands there", apart. . . . He is everything, yet the other. He is at hand, easy of access; yet beyond' (123–4). Ramanujan concludes that 'in a poem like 1.1.4, grammar becomes poetry, and poetry becomes theology. . . . Conceptions of god are enacted by word and syntax' (126).

Only on this hundredth reading did it suddenly strike me: the first poem in *Hymns for the Drowning* contrasts in a very specific respect with the poem that starts the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva*: the different use of the verb 'to stand'. The Tamil poet uses the Tamil verb to affirm god's permanence in the midst of his own changing body, which is the universe, whereas the Kannada saint revolting against his brahman heritage uses

the Sanskrit 'standing' to denote an earthly temple that will surely *not* stand forever, for it is only the human embodiment of Lord Śiva who endures. These viewpoints are not opposites, but they clearly point to differing emphases in the rich *bhakti* tradition.

TYPOLOGIES OF *BHAKTI* SAINTS

While the focus of the first two strands (found in the two pieces discussed above) is on poetic expression, the third strand (found in 'On Women Saints' and 'Men, Women, and Saints' in this volume) attempts to generalise upon a vast range of stories and story-cycles about the *bhakti* saints. Ramanujan's historical interest is in the great shift in Indian cultures and religion brought about by the *bhakti* movements. He is not interested in utilising or rejecting the hagiographies as historical sources about the individual lives of the saints. The stories, however, especially when seen together with the poems, make it easy to recognise common features in all the saints and to distinguish between different types of saints. The approach in 'On Women Saints' and 'Men, Women, and Saints' seems more Western and social scientific than that of the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva* and the Afterword to *Hymns for the Drowning*, but it may in part be inspired by the *bhakti* tradition's own distinctions between types of saints. Nonetheless, Ramanujan has come up with a new and very suggestive typology. In the first two essays below, which should be read together as part of a single project, he distinguishes between high-caste Hindu men who become saints and all other saints, including both low-caste men and all women, and he then points out the distinctive features of women saints. It is the high caste men, 'twice born' in the brahmanical system through the ceremony of putting on the sacred thread, who must become 'twice born' or 'born again' (in the Christian sense), for they must be converted. Specifically, they must overcome their high caste prejudice and sometimes even their masculinity. Women saints and low-caste men saints are like William James' 'once born' souls. They need not be converted; they are already, quite naturally, wives or slaves of the Lord. They, however, have to struggle against the obstacles that social hierarchy and family structures put in their path.

HIDDEN IMAGES IN IMAGE-LESS *BHAKTI*

The Vīraśaiva devotion as it is presented in the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva* seems both aniconic and iconoclastic and therefore in sharp contrast to the profuse imagery of myth and temple in the earlier Tamil

bhakti poets referred to in the Afterword to *Hymns for the Drowning*. There is, indeed, an important contrast, but there are also significant connections. Some of them are noted in the specific introductions to the four Vīraśaiva poets that appear in *Speaking of Śiva*, including the distinctive signature lines of each poet, lines that use a particular name of Lord Śiva associated with a particular shrine or temple in Karnataka.

In 'The Myths of *Bhakti*,' written several years later, Ramanujan discusses Vīraśaiva poetry's 'subliminal use of mythic images' and illustrates 'the intimate, innovative images of Śiva in the lives of the saints.' Right at the start he recognises the distinction between iconic and aniconic devotion as a useful one, in contrast to the distinction between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* conceptions of the devotee's Lord: 'All devotional poetry plays on the tension between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*, the lord as person and the lord as principle. If he were entirely a person, he would not be divine, and if he were entirely a principle, a godhead, one could not make poems about him.' We may well accept this critique of a time-honoured distinction and yet recognise important differences in emphasis between devotional traditions. In a way, that is the approach that the rest of the essay takes about the iconic/aniconic distinction. Differently stated, the rejection of temple images by the Vīraśaivas and the paucity of the myths of Śiva in their poems should not lead us to think that physical images or verbal imagery are totally absent. Some images are evoked to show the superiority of Śiva to all the other deities, some other images show each specific devotional relation to Lord Śiva.

'Why an Allama Poem is Not a Riddle' parallels the Introduction to *Speaking of Śiva*: the antistructural message in Vīraśaiva *bhakti* is here exemplified in the words of its most radical representative, Allama Prabhu. His 'obscure riddle-like questioning poems' are unique among Vīraśaiva poets, but not in the Indian tradition as a whole, for they are part of a tradition of 'reversed or topsy-turvy language.' This tradition among the Nātha *yogis* and other esoteric cults provides poets like Allama with a vocabulary that they use even while they reject reliance on the techniques of such esoteric *yogis*. Here Ramanujan does draw a clear distinction with the 'saguṇa poets . . . who devote themselves to . . . gods with bodies—parts, and passions' who share a different 'second language—that of myth, temples . . . holy names and attributes, and to motifs and genres of erotic poetry.' All this Allama rejects in his denial of the possibility of finding metaphors for god. Instead, his poems have much in common with riddles, but as we see in the title of the essay, there is a crucial difference. Allama discards metaphor but in some poems expresses

his utter joy in union with the indescribable god, and makes a beggar's plea for a return to that blessed state. 'Give me now the Absolute.' Even the *saguṇa* poets suggest *nirguṇa*, Ramanujan maintains, for without that transcendent element there is not the tension required for religious poetry. On the other hand, the *nirguṇa* poets have also their *saguṇa* side. As mystics, they may celebrate a lord without qualities, 'but as poets, they have to have images.' The later Vīraśaiva tradition resolves this tension by assuming that these great saints pass through six mystical stages, and they even arrange the poems of the male saints according to the stages of mystical consciousness in which they were composed. For Ramanujan, however, the theory of stages is like the answer to a riddle, and for him the difference between a riddle and a poem of Allama is that a riddle has a solution. After first baffling us, a riddle 'returns us via the scenic route to where we were. An Allama poem moves you out of where you were.' 'A riddle without an answer is not complete. In an Allama poem, not being able to answer is the answer.' This poet also has a repertoire of images, but his aim is to produce in those who read his poems a mystification, a 'derangement in a well-arranged world'.

AN UNFINISHED CONVERSATION

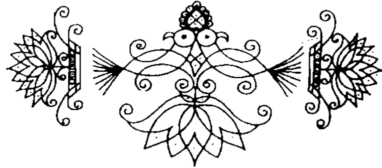
We have included as the penultimate essay in this section an early piece entitled 'Varieties of *Bhakti*,' a short foray into a comparison of *bhakti* poetry with Western devotional poetry. This essay includes some suggestive comparisons but ends with the unsettling conclusion that finally it is the differences that matter: 'Poems are unique and incomparable as poems. Only abstraction and restatement render them comparable.' That is true, but poems are not only particular verbal structures; they convey a meaning within and beyond their structure. Translation assumes that such meaning can be shared with speakers of another language, though there are but few translators like Ramanujan who can also partially reproduce the structure in the creative act of transposing meaning to a new linguistic key.

There are some hints in 'Varieties of *Bhakti*' and many suggestions in more recent comments that both similarities and differences can be found in reading poems from different religious 'worlds'. How important are the similarities—and the differences? This question is not systematically treated in any of the essays in this section, but perhaps it is there as an invisible fourth strand in Ramanujan's interpretation of *bhakti*.

My admiration for the poet kept me, I now see, from questioning his

prose interpretation of the poems. I am left with the regret that I did not join more fully at the level of prose in a conversation about the poems. In the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition an ongoing prose conversation about Nammāḻvār's sacred poems is a crucial constituent in the life of the community. Perhaps such conversation can now be extended. We all regret that we can no longer respond to new essays by the poet-translator, but we rejoice in his extending the conversation about South Indian sacred poems to the rest of India and to the West, and we can now join in the conversation about Ramanujan's distinctive interpretations, a conversation that has only just begun.

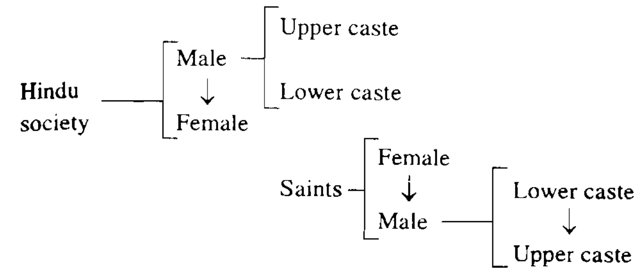
On Women Saints



Love has long been a central metaphor for religious experience. A well-known passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* likens the ultimate attainment of freedom and fearlessness to the sensation a man has in the embrace of his wife: so does a person, 'when in the embrace of the intelligent Soul [know] nothing within or without. . . . [H]is desire is satisfied, in which the Soul is his desire, in which he is without desire and without sorrow' (Hume 1931, 136). Philosophers continue the tradition, as does Yamuna when he says, 'Vision is *parabhakti*: union is *parajñāna*: fear of a new separation is *paramabhakti*' (quoted in Vaudeville 1962, 40). In *bhakti* poetry one finds new expressions of this old awareness. The word *prema* ('love'), for instance, which is rare in the Indian epic and becomes common in *kāvya* poetry, takes on a new life in the *bhakti* idiom. An especially arresting aspect of the *bhakti* milieu, however, is the extent to which *bhakti* itself appears as 'feminine' in nature, by contrast to Vedic sacrifice, which may be considered 'masculine' in ethos, personnel, and language.[1] The chief mood of *bhakti* is the erotic (*sṛṅgāra*), seen almost entirely from an Indian woman's point of view, whether in its phase of separation or of union. Thus, when saints both male and female address love poems to Kṛṣṇa and Śiva and adopt such feminine personae as wife (*kāntā*), illicit lover (*parakīya*), trysting woman (*abhisārikā*), even Rādhā herself, they are drawing on a long, rich history.

It is important, however, to distinguish between various kinds of saints. There are significant differences of life pattern between upper-caste and outcast male saints, and between upper-caste male saints and all women saints. For upper-caste male saints the *bhakti* point of view effects a number of reversals when compared with normative Hindu views such as those represented in Manu's *Dharmaśāstra*. According to

Manu the female is subordinate to the male and the outcast to the upper-caste, but in the lives of the *bhakti* saints 'the last shall be first': men wish to renounce their masculinity and to become as women; upper-caste males wish to renounce pride, privilege, and wealth, seek dishonour and self-abasement, and learn from the untouchable devotee. This reversal may be diagrammed as follows.



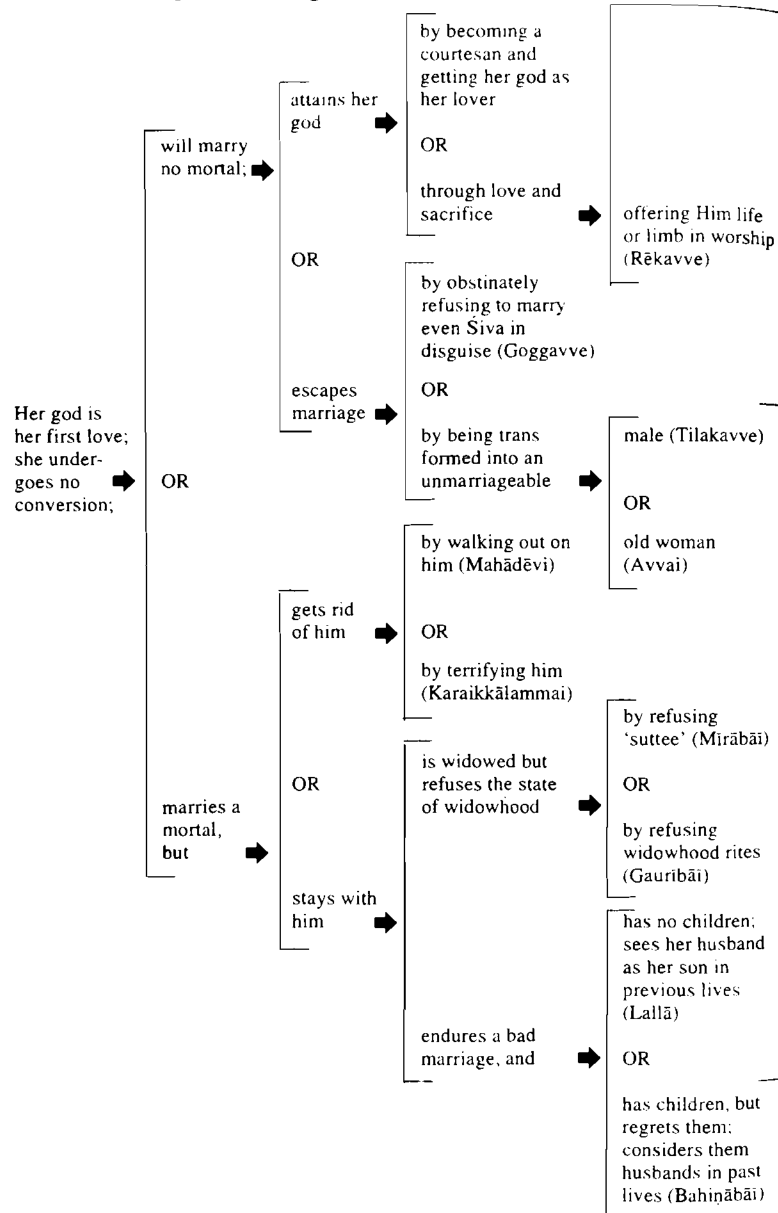
In Chapter 14, 'Men, Women and Saints', I have detailed various ways in which these reversals are accomplished, and speculated on the possible psychological patterns of such a desire for reversal. Here I shall discuss another aspect of the same configuration: the way in which Indian women saints invert and even subvert the traditional ideals of womanhood embodied in such mythic figures as Sītā and Sāvitrī, adopting different patterns altogether.

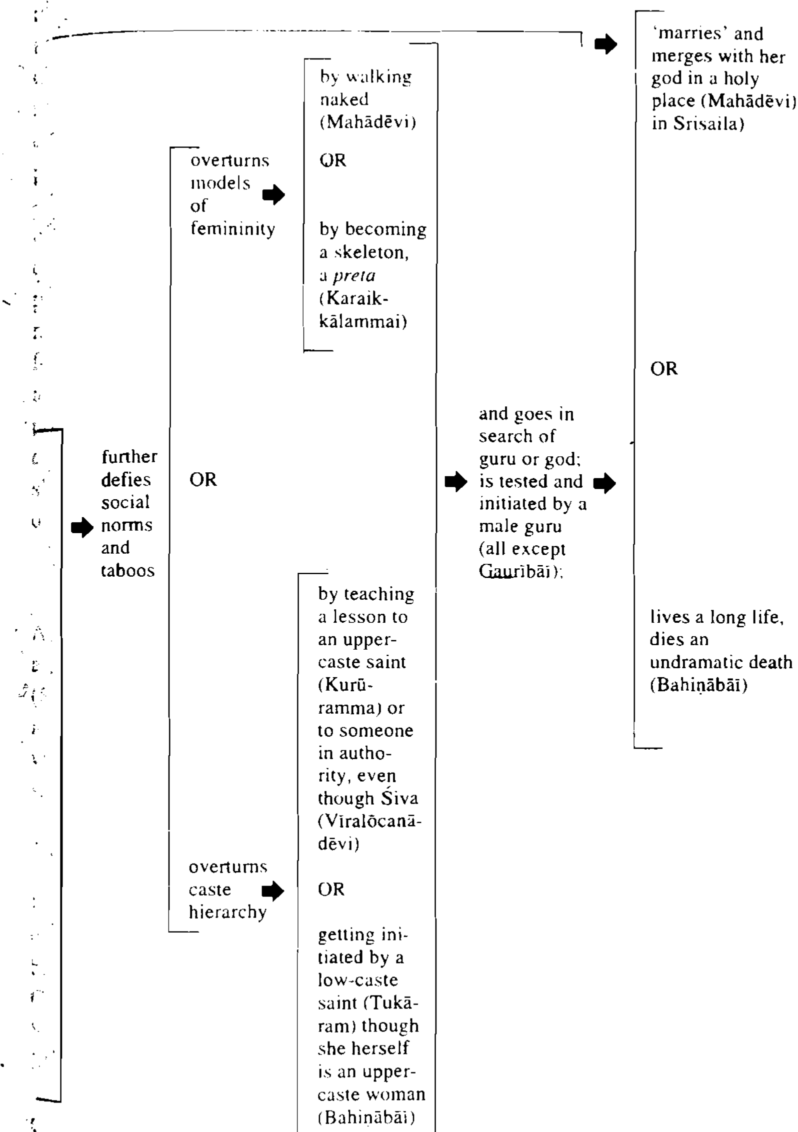
I began my study of women saints by examining the detailed history of a Vīraśaiva woman saint, Mahādevyyakkā, and then proceeded to look at the lives of several dozen women saints as given in the compendium of Ta. Su. Samaraya, the *Śivaśaraṇakathāratnakośa* ('Encyclopaedia of Vīraśaiva Saints').[2] I found a remarkable consensus among the Vīraśaiva examples. When I added the lives of women saints from other traditions and places in India (for instances, Bahiṇābāī of Maharashtra, Lallā of Kashmir, Mīrā of Rajasthan, Āṇṭāḷ of Tamilnadu), an extraordinary composite emerged before my eyes, in which the women saints' lives seem to display the five phases in sequence that are summarised in Chart 1 below. A detailed description of the patterns follows the chart.

EARLY DEDICATION TO GOD

Manu says, in a notorious passage, 'In childhood a woman should be protected by her father, in youth by her husband, in old age by her son. Verily, a woman does not deserve freedom.'[3] The woman saint, however,

Chart 1. Stages of Life for Women Saints





This chart presents a composite of the lives of Indian women saints. I have amused myself by presenting it as a 'flow chart' of possibilities, indicating, from left to right, the sequence of life stages. At each stage different saints follow different opinions (E.g., either marrying a mortal or refusing to do so); each choice leads to further choices. These options are not the same as those for a male upper-caste saint, but are often similar to those of an untouchable male saint, especially when marriage is not the issue. These patterns deserve further inquiry. (Names in brackets are of saints whose lives illustrate specific options.)

is not typically bound to a man. Instead she is dedicated at an early age to God; God is her first love. Unlike upper-caste male saints, therefore, she need undergo no conversion. She defies her parents, escaping marriage in one of several ways. She may attain God by a single-minded love, as Āṇṭāḷ does, or win him by extreme forms of worship and sacrifice, and as does Rēkavve, a Vīraśaiva who uses a piece of her own flesh to complete the Lord's garland because she cannot find a red flower. Or she may obtain her divine lover as a courtesan: this is how Vīrasaṅgavve manages to win Śiva. Another possibility is to become transformed into an unmarriageable old woman, like Avvai, or into a male by God's grace, as Tilakavve does. Finally, the woman may simply renounce marriage. Goggavve is so obstinate that she refuses to marry the disguised Śiva; even when he threatens to kill her she does not yield.

DENIAL OF MARRIAGE

Some women saints do get married, but in my sample of nearly a hundred women saints' lives there are only two women who endure a bad marriage, Lallā and Bahiṇā. Of these, only one, Bahiṇā, has a child and contrary to everything Manu leads us to expect, she regrets it bitterly. Indeed, she attempts to deny her inescapable relation to her son by considering him a companion of former lives, thus transforming him in her mind. Lallā does the same in relation to her husband, viewing him as a son in a former life.

It is more common for a married woman saint to get rid of her husband than to endure him. She may walk out on him, leaving him for her only true lover, as Dālāyi deserts her husband while he is making love to her, at the call of Śiva; or she may terrify her husband by miracles, as does Kāraikkālammai. Another pattern is for her to be widowed, and in that case it is characteristic for the woman to treat her new status in such a way as to indicate that she denies the reality of having been married in the first place. Mīrā refuses *satī*, Gauri and Kurūramma refuse to acknowledge that they were widowed when their husbands died, as they were always married to God. Interesting in this connection is the fact that the Newārs of Nepal marry all their young women first to Lord Nārāyaṇa; thus their earthly husbands are all second husbands and they can never be widowed (Levy 1978).

DEFYING SOCIETAL NORMS

In the next phase the woman saint further defies social norms and taboos. For instance, she rebukes men for their sexual advances, and teaches them a lesson when they treat her as a 'sex object'. Kāraikkālammai turns into a skeleton before a lust-infatuated male. Mahādevī throws away her clothes and with them the investment in society that the division between male and female that differential clothing signifies; abandoning modesty, she walks naked, covered only by her tresses. Some of her most poignant poems are in defense of her nudity.[4]

In this phase, like the untouchable and low-caste saint, the woman often defies caste hierarchy. She usually teaches a lesson to an upper-caste man, a priest, an elder, or even a senior saint, by some miracle or piece of wisdom. For instance, Kurūr Amma of Kerala was rebuked by no less a devotee than Vilvamaṅgaḷ, the great poet-saint, because he found her reciting the name of Viṣṇu during her menstrual period. She asks him, 'Can you guarantee that we'll not die in a state of bodily impurity?' He is humbled by the truth of her feeling. Vīracoḷādēvi teaches even Śiva a similar lesson. Or if the saint is an upper-caste woman, she shocks the orthodox by taking initiation from a low-caste saint, as Bahīṇa does from Tukārām.

INITIATION

Almost all woman saints, in this stage, are also questioned and tested by a male figure, as Mahādevī was by Allama, and/or initiated by him (Ramanujan 1973, 112–13). This seems to be a concession to the general normative Hindu pattern: even in the lives of famous modern Indian women the mentor and initiator into public life is a male authority figure who legitimises the unusual female role (Zelliott 1978).

MARRYING THE LORD

In the last phase the woman saint 'marries the Lord'. In the case of Mahādevī a new, second family of saints arranges the marriage to the divine bridegroom and gives her away. Typically the woman saint merges with God in a temple or holy place, as does Mahādevī in Srisaila, or Āṇṭāḷ in Śrīraṅgam. Of all the saints in my sample, only one, Bahīṇa, lives a long life of dedication and dies an ordinary, undramatic death.

These phases of the woman saint's career are presented above in Chart 1, showing the different alternatives represented at each point by different lives. Some of the stages in the sequence are not found in some lives. This kind of stage-skipping could, however, be represented in a more complex diagram of the choices at each point: the sociolinguistic flow chart for the choice of appropriate terms of address (first name, kin

term, nickname, etc.) provides an appropriate model. For simplicity's sake, I present a less complex diagram in Chart 1.

SAINTS' WIVES

A related pattern is to be found in the role of saints' wives. Even when women are not saints themselves but are married to saints, they still appear to be superior to their husbands, needing no conversion. They are the vehicles of divine grace for the male saint or poet. They come to see God, duty, and love effortlessly, even with a blessed blindness. I will content myself with one example.

In the story of Purandharadāsa's conversion,[5] Lord Viṭṭhala, disguised as a mendicant brahman, comes to Purandhara first, but finds him a hard-hearted money-lender who turns him away. He then goes to Purandhara's wife and tells her that he needs money to get his daughter married. She has no money, but gladly gives him her nose-ring. He promptly disguises himself as a rich diamond trader and takes it to Purandhara to sell it. The money-lender recognises it at once as his wife's, asks the brahman to wait in his shop, and goes inside his quarters. When he questions his wife, she is amazed to find that she has another, more splendid jewel of the same kind in her jewel box. She sees at once that it is a miracle, and that the brahman is none other than God himself. Purandhara runs back to his shop to see him, but he is gone, having left only a supernatural fragrance to fill the shop.

I would like to suggest that the contrast between the woman saint who rejects family and child, and the saint's wife who 'out-saints' him, is parallel to the contrast between *mother goddesses* and *consort goddesses*. The former are not really mothers at all and have no male consorts, or trample on them as well as on male demons. The consort goddesses, such as Lakṣmī and Umā, are benign (*saumya*), not fierce (*ugra*); they contain the power—they *are* the power (*śakti*)—of the great gods.

A comparison with the typical male saint—though male saints are harder to typify, a point to which we shall return below—will help further to define the composite profile of the female saint. A figure such as Allama has a life that runs somewhat as follows:

(*a*) an early life of ease and pleasure;
(*b*) abasement, loss, and subsequent awakening;
(*c*) conversion, initiation at the hands of a guru;
(*d*) the defying of orthodox authority and social norms;

(*e*) the converting or defeating of men of other religions (e.g., Jains) or sects;
(*f*) the founding of his own sect; and
(*g*) merging with God.[6]

Many of the male saints, for example, Basava and Dāsimayya, have families; they do not reject family life as most of the female saints do (or have to do) before they pursue their careers as saints. Whereas men may retain their families and in some instances direct their poetry toward social reform, women continue to choose love as the subject of their poetry, despite the enormity of the social protest implicit in their lives as they reject parents, husband, children, household, shelter, even clothes. In this respect they resemble the Rādhā who, as Karine Schomer tells us, was so very distasteful to progressive Hindi poets of the 1930s; they asked her to forget her obsession with Kṛṣṇa for a minute and think of social reform (Hawley and Wulf 1982). Such an entreaty would have been equally necessary in the case of most women saints. They may give up their natal and conjugal families, but they substitute for them a second family composed of saints; and their poetry is still concerned, to use the excellent Tamil distinction, with private and interior (*akam*) themes.[7] Similarly, although these women are highly respected as saints, and their poetry may be considered more deeply moving than that of their male counterparts, as in the case of Āṇṭāḷ or Mahādevī, they never become *gurus* in the public realm as Basava, Kabīr, and Namāḷvār do.

The upper-caste male's battle is with the system as a whole, often internalised as the enemy within, whereas the woman saint's struggle is with family and family-values. She struggles not with her own temptations, but with husband and priest, and with her wifely and maternal roles. It is significant that Mahādevī is called *akkā*, 'elder sister', for this name shows a concern with separating her from marital roles.

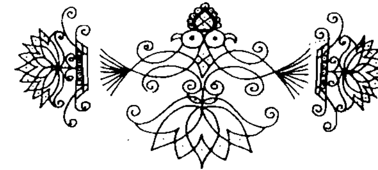
The males take on female personae: they are feminine, yearning, passive towards a male god. Before God all men are women. But no female saint, howevermuch she may defy male-oriented 'relational' antinodes, takes on a male persona. It is as if, being already female, she has no need to change anything to turn towards God. Like the untouchable and the low-caste saint, she need shed nothing, for she has nothing to shed: neither physical prowess, nor social power, nor punditry, nor even spiritual pride. She is already where she needs to be, in these saints' legends.

The biographical legends imply that somehow women are secure in their identities, and hence do not need to undergo a conversion or change

their sex. Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Nancy Chodorow have pointed out that males have elaborate initiation rites because they have to be weaned from their mothers and given a separate masculine identity in order to enter the male world.[8] Men have to change to become 'themselves'; only after the change may they long for the earlier feminine identification with the mother-figure.[9] Women, by contrast, may continue to identify with their mothers. The woman saint may fight the male in husband, priest, and elder; she may love a male god. But she remains feminine, and in her love poetry she rejoices intensely in this identity.

I wish to end where I began. The classical ideals embodied in Sītā and Sāvitrī are not the only models available to Indian women. In the context of *bhakti* a different track is opened for them, if the initial defiance of marriage and of other family pressures can be managed. Given the parallel contexts—the broadly 'separate worlds' staked out for men and women in traditional societies—such careers are not surprising, nor considered aberrant (Papanek 1973; Fallers and Fallers 1976).

Men, Women, and Saints



In this essay, I shall further illustrate the notion of reflexivity, by talking about the lives of (mostly) south Indian saints—especially the way male and female saints have contrasted careers, different graphs of struggle, growth, and salvation. I shall also speak briefly of untouchable saints, who form a class by themselves. As you know, every major group of south Indian saints has at least one woman and one untouchable among them. Their lives reflect upon each other and offer alternative realities.

I

After the sixth century, a new kind of person comes upon the historical scene in India, first in Tamilnadu and later in other parts of the country. Their poems are their best introduction. There is no single word, like the English word 'saint,' in Indian languages for this kind of person, but one can find different words depending on the religious group: the Kannada Vīraśaivas call them *śarana*, the Kannada Vaiṣṇavas *dāsa*, the Tamil Śaivites *nāyaṉmār*, the Tamil Vaiṣṇavas *āḻvār*. In northern traditions, such religious persons are called *sants*. In what follows, we will call him/her a saint, for want of anything better.

Like everything new, he or she is not entirely new. He or she is the composite, the sum, of a number of precedents and components. I once saw the diagram of a steam engine, with dates on each of the parts, the steam chamber, the piston, the eccentric on the wheel, and the immemorial wheel—and I had the vision of all these components gradually, historically, adding up to what we have come to know, since the nineteenth century, as the steam engine. So too the Indian saint figure.

In the Vedas, we hear of the seers, the Quakers and the Shakers (the *vipra*), the *keśin* or long-haired ones. They are not the fire-tending hearth-watching priests or *purohitas*. They are inspired, ecstatic; they drink the

soma and have visions. Already in the Vedas, there is an opposition between Agni and Soma. Agni or Fire is the domestic, social, priestly element. He is the fire of the hearth and is propitiated by offerings and sacrifices; he is the mouth of all the gods; he is in every home, a welcome guest. Soma, on the other hand, is psychedelic, mind-blowing, not exactly social—probably a sacred mushroom, a juice for which maybe the body itself is the ultimate filter. It is part of the ecstatic religion of the time, not easily contained by social arrangements.

Long-hair holds fire, holds the drug, holds heaven and earth.
Long-hair opens everything under the sun. Long-hair declares it light.
These sages swathed in wind, put dirty red tatters on,
When gods get in them, they ride with the rush of the wind.
'Crazy with wisdom, we have lifted ourselves to the wind.
Our bodies are all you mortals can see.'
He sails through the air, seeing appearances spread out below.
The sage, this god and that his friend, friendly to all that's well-done.
The stallion of wind, companion of gales, and lashed on by gods—the sage.
He is home by two seas, the waters east and those of the west.
He moves in the motion of heavenly girls and youths, of beasts in the woods.
Long-hair, reading their minds, is their sweet and most pleasing companion.
The wind has stirred it, Kunnamnama prepared it for him.
Long-hair drinks from the cup, sharing the drug with Rudra.

Ṛg Veda 10.136 (translated by Frits Staal)

The Vedas also spoke of the *kavis*, the poets who were possessed by Vāk, the Goddess of Speech, and composed hymns. Then there were the philosopher types, fully developed in the Upaniṣads, and the teachers in the Forest Books, who speculated on what is brahman, what is the one thing worth knowing, knowing which one need know nothing else; their work is all dialogue. But we know little about them personally—we know only their voices and stances. In the epics and the Purāṇa-collections of myths, we hear of *saṃnyāsīs* (renouncers), *sādhus* (ascetics), *ṛṣis* (sages). The *ṛṣis* wander through the three worlds, rising and falling like Viśvāmitra, cursing and blessing like Dūrvāsa. Sometimes, the *ṛṣis* are also poets—Vyāsa of the *Mahābhārata* and Vālmiki of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are celebrated examples. We know a lot about them, their folly and their wisdom, their illegitimate offspring, their roles in the lives of mortals. In the two epics mentioned, they seem to have given even self-descriptions. The epics and Purāṇas also describe the deeds and characters of *ṛṣis* like Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra. Then we hear also of devotees like Prahlāda, devotee of Viṣṇu, in the Purāṇas.

But none of them are 'saints.' Poets, philosophers, sages, devotees, world-renouncers, yes; but not saints. I think the first saint-figure, the archetype or prototype, who appears on the scene is really the Buddha. He has all the marks: the spirit of quest, the sensitivity to experience, the impatience with speculation and ritual, the willingness to try every method from asceticism to *gurus* and forest solitudes, an eye that sees death and decay, an ear that hears the 'still sad music of humanity'. His life changes after an episode of enlightenment under a tree. And then he is possessed of the urgent need to enlighten others, not in Sanskrit but in the language of the time: a mission to spread the truth he has glimpsed, not for its own sake but to lighten human burdens, to take others where he himself has gone. So are the great Jain teachers, among the first exemplars of this way of life. But they and the Buddha later become god-figures, found whole religions—or they are at least considered to have done so. Buddha becomes Buddhism, Jina becomes Jainism. A similar fate awaits the saints—Kabīr is enlisted in a *pantha* or path, Sūr is attached by the Vallabha sect, and Basava is seen as the founder of Vīraśaivism.

By the sixth or seventh century of the Common Era, all these types or figures—the wandering poet, the long-haired ecstatic, the anti-Vedic Upanishadic seer or *ṛṣi*, the Buddha or Jina figures—seem to come together in the singing, wandering poet-saints. At least to hindsight, the figures acquire a new configuration. For the first time in Indian literature, as in the case of the Buddha and the Jain Mahāvira, their lives are recorded in legend and become part of religious scripture. They, as persons, become as important as their sayings and their poems.

But, unlike the Buddha, the Hindu saints do not appear alone, they seem to appear in droves, in interacting groups of three or four in these early times. They often form a composite saint, each taking on a different face of the religious experience. For instance, among the Vīraśaivas, if Basava is the struggling reformer-saint, Allama is metaphysical, imperious, the Master (*prabhu*); Mahādevī, the woman-saint, is in love with god, and god to her is a sensual and aesthetic experience; still another saint, Dāsimayya, is fierce, even crude at times, and hates those who do not see what he sees; Cennabasava is the theologian, aptly the nephew/son-in-law of Basava. It is Cennabasava who finally puts a sectarian stamp on the group, makes rules and jargon (*paribhāṣā*) that set them apart. Each saint has a different signature line, expressive of his/her special bias: 'lord of the meeting rivers' (*kūḍalasaṅgamadēva*) is the signature for Basava who yearns for social unity and equality; 'lord of caves' (*guhēśvara*) for Allama, obsessed with knowledge and ignorance,

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light and darkness, given too to dark sayings and twilight language (*sandhyābhāṣā*); 'my lord white as jasmine' (*cennmallikārjuna*) for Mahādevī, who is all eyes for the beauty of her lord; and 'Rāmanātha', the Śiva who was worshipped even by Rāma, for Dāsimayya who is concerned with prosyletisation and with we/they distinctions. Each saint chooses an aspect, an epithetic, for his god that suits his own temperament and career.

The Vīraśaiva or the Vaiṣṇava movement, I think, was not made by any one of the saints, but by this composite. The Vīraśaiva saints, for instance, overlap in time, like strands in a rope: they are elder and younger contemporaries to each other—they are *aṇṇa* or elder brother, *akkā* or elder sister, to each other. They are often thought of as a family, as a society. They make a genealogy for themselves which includes earlier saints (like the sixty-three saints of Tamil Śaivism), making and dwelling in a House of Experience or *anubhavamaṇṭapa*. Their lives are later written together, their dialogues and encounters (however fictive, they are part of the truth of this movement) recorded in works like *Śūnyasaṁpādane*; their poems become part of a continuous systematic anthology, which is sung, chanted, often in temple services (like the Tamil Śaiva poems), explicated in philosophical polemic. They are thought of as one, plural yet singular: the saint as a fourth person singular, if you wish, a virtual presence outside the normal three-person grammar of daily systems. As they become part of the philosophy, the theology, the sects and schisms, they inspire the temple service, and are even incorporated into the architecture of temples. The inner doorstep of a Viṣṇu temple is named for one of the Āḻvār saints, Kulacēkarar, as if his wish in this following poem were granted:

Lord,
  you cut through
    the bush and weed
of my acts:

great lord of the Venkatam hill:
let me be the doorstep
of your temple
where your men
  and the gods and celestial nymphs
would walk to your shrine
and I can see the coral of your lips.

  Kulacēkarar; Tamil, 11th century (my translation)

They are not only composite like the double or quintuple heroes of our great epics. They also form a family, call each other brother, sister (*aṇṇa*, *akkā*); when the woman saint wishes to get married to her lord, they become the bride's party and give her away. The saint is not born into this family, but reborn into it. The second birth often cancels the characteristics of the first, with its caste, name, inheritance, household, and often gender. The saints form a cult, develop a culture their own, speak a common dialect or raise one to poetry, create or adopt a special poetic genre like the Vīraśaiva *vacana* or the Tamil *antāti*, which they all use to celebrate forms of the same god. They, with their followers, form a new society, a second society within the larger one. Thus together, they constitute a family, a cult, a culture, a society, counter to the ones of ordinary men and women: they form, in Victor Turner's terms, a counter-structure at all levels, a community seeking *communitas*.

Not that they last that way. As Kafka's parable has it: From time to time, leopards enter the holy temple and drink of the holy water. If it happens often enough, the leopards become part of the ceremony.

II

Between the sixth and ninth centuries, there were over seventy-five saints in Tamilnadu—the sixty-three listed traditionally for Śaivism and the twelve for Vaiṣṇavism. In the total south Indian Śaiva canon, there are over three hundred. Like classical Tamil poets who wandered from patron to patron and wrote about their wanderings in poems called *āṟṟuppaṭai* or guide poems, the saint-poets wandered from shrine to shrine and sang about them. They were peripatetic, many lived outdoors, according to the legends. Even the woman saint says,

For hunger, there is the town's rice
  in the begging bowl.
For thirst, there are tanks, streams, wells.
For sleep, there are the ruins of temples.
For soul's company
  I have you, O lord
  white as jasmine.
  Mahādevyyakkā 199 (Ramanujan 1973)

We learn about south Indian routes and temples through these poets' poems about them.

Much of this is true of other parts of India as well. For the first time

in Hinduism, we begin to have, on record, what may truly be called 'a religious movement,' both literally and metaphorically. The saint-poets move, the movement also moves, like a wave, transitive, often without actual populations moving. Śaiva *bhakti*, in literary record, appears successively in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and in Kashmir. Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* appears in Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, medieval Hindi dialects, Bengali, and Assamese—often helped by Sanskrit networks and according to legend by the actual travels of the saints to distant places. It is well-known that philosophers like Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja have their *digvijayas*, journeys of conquest, triumphal progresses like those of royal heroes. So do the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints.

The Kannada or Kashmiri saints think of their Tamil predecessors as their line of forebears, call them their *purātanas*, tracing not only a line but a network of transmission. Their lives and legends are part of the canon. The Tamil Śaivas have their hagiographies in *Periyapurāṇam*, the Kannada Śaivas have Harihara's lives of their poets and the *Śūnyasaṁpādane*, a collection of dialogues between the saints arising out of dramatised encounters, setting the *vacana* poems in live contexts. The Vaiṣṇavas all over the country have compendia of saints' lives like the *Bhaktamāla* and the *Bhaktivijaya*. What the Purāṇas did to the gods in depicting their careers, these hagiographies—often also called *Purāṇas*—did to the saints. In some cases, the saints are seen as *aṁśa* or aspects of a god—Nammāḻvār is seen as an incarnation of Viṣṇu's feet, and Caitanya as a complex manifestation of both Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.

For the first time, in an apparently ahistoric tradition, particular human lives become contexts for poems, and become exemplary as only the gods' lives were. And it has been that way ever since.

III

In this essay, I am not looking at these lives, which are often quite operatic, for their historical value (which is another way of looking at them), but for the patterns they project, the conceptual graphs they trace of human careers, the symbolic scenarios they enact.

Socially, they're often said to come from all castes—in Maharashtra, I'm told, every subcaste has a saint. The legends are egalitarian, as often the poems are. Leather-workers, boatmen, weavers, laundrymen, several but not many untouchables, as well as women appear as saints. Every Vīraśaiva saint is identified with an occupation—Mādayya the Boatman, Mācayya the Washerman, Dāsimayya the Weaver.

The anti-hierarchic egalitarian spirit of *bhakti* is often thought to be a mass-movement of the lower classes against the upper, a Marxist movement before Marx was thought of. But, for instance, among the Tamil saints, by actual count, approximately 35% of the Śaiva/Vaiṣṇava saints were brahman by birth (Campantar, Cuntarar, Māṇikkavācakar, Periyāḻvār), 35% kṣatriyas (kings, ministers etc like Cēramāṉ Perumāḷ, Kulacēkarar, Tirumankai), 20% *vellalas*, who were a land-owning cultivator śūdra caste (Appar, Nammāḻvār), 5% low-caste or outcast (Nantaṉār, Tiruppāṇāḻvār), 5% of unknown origin (Āṇṭāḷ).

So it was not just a movement *by* the lowly, *for* the lowly: 90% of the saints were from the twice-born castes, secure enough to reject the high place the social arrangements had given them, secure enough to overthrow security—almost as if to say, 'security is mortal's chiefest enemy.' For to them equality is equalising downwards on the social scale, a downward mobility, almost a seeking of dishonour as among the Cynics of Greece and the Pāśupatas of India, debasing themselves so that they may be cleansed of pride. As Mahādevī, born to privilege, consort of a chieftain, says,

> Make me go from house to house
>   with hands stretched for alms.
> If I beg, make them give nothing.
> If they give, make it fall to the ground.
> If it falls, before I pick it up,
>   make a dog take it,
>
> O lord
> white as jasmine.
>
> Mahādevyyakkā 132 (my translation)

Or see what happens when a Śaiva brahman looks for a guest to feed before he can ritually break his fast on the twelfth day of the moon, finds one, but the guest wants to eat a dead buffalo. So the brahman and his wife (many of the saints are householders) actually find a buffalo and skin it and cook it for the guest who is none other than Śiva, setting them a test of the most extreme kind, as is his wont. By cutting up and cooking a buffalo, the brahman has become a *caṇḍāḷa*, the lowest of the low. As in the liminal phase of a rite of passage, he goes through a change of state by going through a change of status. This reversal, this renunciation—not of the world, but of one's most prized possessions—is part of the conversion experience in these lives. The much-loved possession may be a child whom he has to sacrifice (Ciruttontar); or pride in one's strength

(Tirumankai); often one's beloved (Vemana); or one's prized illusions of sexuality (Bilvamangal, Allama). Often, one's taste, one's cultivated sense of delicacy is repelled, one's stomach is turned, as the *bhakta* receives his *dīkṣa*. Such a traumatic or epiphanic conversion experience is not much evidenced in earlier Hinduism, as it is in the lives of *bhaktas*. *Bhakti* as a path is not an easy one, it too is a walking on the razor's edge, an *asidhārāvrata*:

Don't you take on
this thing called *bhakti*:

like a saw
it cuts when it goes
and it cuts again
when it comes.

If you risk your hand
with a cobra in a pitcher,
will it let
you pass?

Basavaṇṇa 212 (Ramanujan 1973)

One of the most poignant of these conversion experiences is detailed in the life of Allama. There are two traditions regarding Allama's life. One considers him Śiva himself, arriving in the world to teach the way of freedom. To try him, Śiva's consort, Pārvati, sent down her dark side, Māye or Illusion. Allama's parents were named allegorically 'Selflessness' (*nirahaṅkāra*) and 'The Wise One' (*sujñāni*). Māye was born to parents named 'Selfishness' (*mamakāra*) and 'Lady Illusion' (*mayadevi*). In this version, Allama was not even born: his parents undertook penance for their 'truth-bringing sorrowless' son, and found by their side a shining child. Thus, unborn, he descended into the world. Later, when he was playing the drum in a temple, Māye fell in love with him and appointed him her dancing master. She tried all her charms on him but could not move him. Pārvati, who had sent him the temptation, realised that tempting him was useless and withdrew Māye to herself. A more human variant of this descent-version speaks of Allama and the enchantress as minions of Śiva and Pārvati, cursed to be born in the world.

There are differences from variant to variant in the names of the parents, the place, and manner of birth. The most vivid tradition of this kind is the earliest, written up by Harihara, a brilliant fifteenth-century poet who wrote the lives of the Vīraśaiva saints in galloping blank verse.

According to Harihara, Allama, talented temple-drummer, son of a dance teacher, falls in love with Kāmalate ('love's tendril'). In marriage, they were new lovers; their love was without 'end, beginning, or middle'; 'drowned in desire', knowing no weight or impediment. But Kāmalate was suddenly stricken down by a fever and died soon after. Allama wandered in his grief like a madman, benumbed, his memory eclipsed, his heart broken, calling out for the dead Kāmalate, in field, forest, village. While he was sitting in an out-of-town grove, downcast, scratching the ground idly with his toenail, he saw something: the golden *kalaśa* (pinnacle, cupola) of a temple jutting forth from the earth, like 'the nipple-peak on the breast of the Goddess of Freedom'. When he got the place dug and excavated, however, there was no Kāmalate. But before him stood the closed door of a shrine. Careless of consequence, Allama kicked the door open, and entered. He saw before him a *yogi* in a trance, concentrated on the *liṅga*. His eyes and face were all aglow, his locks glowing, a garland of *rudrākṣi* seeds round his neck, serpent earrings on his ears. Like the All-giving Tree, he sat there in the heart of the temple. The *yogi's* name was Animiṣayya (the One without eyelids, the open-eyed one). While Allama stood there astonished, Animiṣayya gave into his hand a *liṅga*. Even as he handed over the *liṅga*, Animiṣayya's life went out. In that moment of transference, Allama became enlightened, and wandered henceforth where the lord called him and where the lord took him. This experience of the secret underground, the cave-temple, is what is probably celebrated in the name *guhēśvara* or 'lord of caves', which appears in almost every Allama *vacana*.

The pattern of beginning 'at first base', being 'abased' already, that we find in the lives of the women saints, is also true of the outcasts and untouchables. They are literally *naive*, 'new-born'; or they are holy fools, walk about like ghouls, are called *pēy*, *pūtam* (ghost, spirit), with no pride of place or talent or intelligence. They are already open to the lord. Their idiocy and innocence gives them a faith that intelligence cannot brook or nurture. Their struggle is not with themselves but with the brahman who will not let them enter the temple to see their beloved god.

A typical story is that of Tiruppāṇāḻvār. He was an untouchable who contemplated god all day. Once he was lost in meditation on the river bank where the temple priest, Sāraṅga, came to fetch water for the temple, found him in the way and flung a stone at him. The priest carried his ritual water to the lord, with his customary pomp of music, yaktails, and umbrellas. But when he entered the shrine, the lord's image seemed

sullen and unaccepting. Sāraṅga then had a vision. The lord said to him, 'How dare you hurt my faithful Tiruppāṇaṉ? Did you take him for a lowcaste brute? Go now and lift him on your shoulders and carry him to this temple. Let the whole world witness it. That's my command.' Sāraṅga woke from his reverie and ran to fetch Tiruppāṇār, who still stood on the river bank with his lute, singing of his god. The priest fell at his feet. Tiruppāṇār the untouchable was aghast, and shrank from the touch of the upper-caste man, kept his distance as an untouchable should. The priest had to explain lord Raṅganātha's command and convince him that he should let the brahman carry him on his head into the temple shrine. Reluctantly and obediently, Tiruppāṇar let him have his way. Sāraṅga lifted Tiruppāṇar on his shoulders, and carried him in triumph, with onlookers applauding, into the shrine. There the lord appeared in all his splendour to Tiruppāṇāḻvār, who then sang his *Amalanātipirāṉ*, and before everyone's eyes merged with the blaze that was the lord.

Temple entry is a central issue in the lives of untouchable saints. The lord himself sees to it that the orthodox and proud priest is humbled, and that the untouchable is brought into his presence. And the untouchable saint, like many of the women saints (Āṇṭāḷ, Mahādevī) merges into him—so, when the orthodox worship the icon, they have to worship the untouchable too. Similar stories are told of Kanaka the hunter-saint and of Chokhamela. When Kanaka was refused entry into the Udupi temple, he is supposed to have gone behind the temple and sung his devotional songs—when a hole appeared in the back wall of the shrine and the Kṛṣṇa image turned around to listen to his devotee. Even to this day, the image faces a hole in the back wall. In Chokhamela's case, Lord Viṭṭhala himself carries him into the temple and gives him a necklace—but unlike other such saints, the miracle does not endear him to the towns-people, who harass him. He dies crushed by a wall he is repairing.

Still it is rare for an untouchable saint to rail against society or its oppression. Such radical and reformist views are uttered usually neither by the woman saint nor the untouchable—it is the upper- and middle-caste saint who specialises in anti-caste warfare. It is not Chokhamela the Mahar saint of Maharashtra who celebrates the lowly, but Eknāth the brahman saint who, ironically enough, even takes on an untouchable persona and make a triumphant list of all the low-caste saints:

God baked pots with Gora,
drove cattle with Chokha,
cut grass with Samvata,
wove garments with Kabīr,
coloured hide with Ravidas,
sold meat with the butcher Sajana,
melted gold with Narahari,
carried cow-dung with Janabai,
and even became the Mahar messenger of Damaji.
(translated by Eleanor Zelliott)

In such a poem, Eknāth, who defied caste rules, ate with untouchables, wrote poems in the persona of a Mahar who was wiser than a brahman, makes a genealogy of low-born saints, a line as holy as the genealogy of *gurus*.

It is the upper-caste saint who dares to reject caste. It is Basava who can say,

In a brahman house
where they feed the fire
as a god

when the fire goes wild
and burns the house

they splash on it
the water of the gutter
and the dust of the street,

beat their breasts
and call the crowd.

These men then forget their worship
and scold their fire,
O lord of the meeting rivers!

Basavaṇṇa 586 (Ramanujan 1973)

Such a rejection is not due to necessity, but an expression of ideology. It is also, as we have been saying, a shedding of social investments, an act of enlargement for his caste-ridden privileged soul, a move in the direction of authenticity.

So it is the high-born who have to be twice-born, to go through 'the place of excrement' to be born again. Their struggle is with themselves. The *dīkṣa* they receive is often humbling, if not humiliating: Kabīr is kicked by Rāmdās, Sharīf Sāhib is initiated by the last vomit of his dying *guru*.

But the woman fights not with temptation, but with family, husband, molesters, and, like the untouchable saints, with brahmans, social restrictions, and for entry into the congregation (*goṣṭi*) of saints. Not conversion, but the freedom to pursue her god, looking not for a husband who is a god but a god who will be a lover and husband, is her quest.

Field interviews support this view of women having no phase of conversion. Egnor's folk philosopher says, 'What exists is woman; what comes out of it is man.' She summarises his view, 'The internal, common, place is female . . . it is general, unmarked. The female is the source, the male derived: what is basic is unmarked, what has something added is marked.' Her informants' view reverses the Freudian view of penis-envy, of women as lacking something that men have. In Tamil villages, according to Holly Reynolds' observations, the only rite or *caṭaṅku* is marriage—and that's the one she has to contend with. The men's initiation rites (not only in Hinduism, as we will see later) are much more complex. The village women recognised no stages of life, except puberty and marriage. The 'four stages of life' are again for high-born males in orthodox Hinduism—not for śūdras and untouchables.

The high-born male saint has temptations to overcome, inner blocks to dissolve, illusions to be disillusioned about, like Allama. His struggle is with himself. He needs to turn over, to convert. He has to wear sheepskin among the smelly cattle, like Majnu, to see his beloved. As in a poem cited earlier, Kulacēkarar, the Kerala king who was an *āḻvār*, is willing to give up even immortality and salvation to return as a doorstep in a Viṣṇu temple.

Just as the male saint-to-be drops his caste, wealth, intelligence, he finally drops his masculinity, becomes a woman, so that he can be open to the lord. The male saint yearns to achieve a woman's state in his society, so he can yearn for and couple with god—to accept the feminine side of himself, as Jung would say, shedding his machismo. In Tamilnadu, poverty and suffering make one eligible for possession by a deity; they say that no god will possess the rich and the happy. Hence the upper-caste male trials, divestments, as preparations for receiving god's love. In becoming open to the lord and his devotees, he should acquire both male and female characteristics:

> Look here, dear fellow:
> I wear these men's clothes
> only for you.
> Sometimes I am man,
> sometimes I am woman.
> O lord of the meeting rivers,
> I'll make wars for you,
> but I'll be your devotees' bride.
>
> Basavaṇṇa 703 (my translation)

Of the thousand or so poems of Nammāḻvār, 270 of them are in female voices. (In this practice of taking on female personae, he has classical precedents in *caṅkam* poetry, where male poets frequently write in female voices.) The large numbers of love-poems in the *āḻvārs* and in poets like Vidyāpati in the east, find their ultimate canonisation in the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cycles. In a favourite *bhakti* story, both myth and parable, the lord as Kṛṣṇa plays the mischievous lover who hides the clothes of bathing women, and is willing to return them only when they come to him naked (in some paintings, with their hands on their heads, exposing all). Such a story is read as an allegory for the lord's requirement that the human soul be naked and defenceless, and shed even modesty.

In our own times, Gandhi, who was deeply affected by *bhakti* traditions, took on feminine roles. Not only did he spin and act the nurse. As Erik Erikson says,

> phallic maleness, . . . drivenness . . . counterpoints by a need to be moved by a higher inspiration—*qua mulier in conceptu* (like a woman in the act of conception), as Luther said unhesitatingly.
>
> . . . I wonder whether there has ever been another political leader who almost prided himself on being half man and half woman . . . [When Maganlal died, Gandhi had it engraved that it had 'widowed' him.] . . . Shankerlal complained to Gandhi who in jail made him pray at dawn and spin for hours: 'The worst mother-in-law could not be as tough with her daughter-in-law as you are with me.' Gandhi (proving his point): 'You'll appreciate it later.'

Thus, in the course of constituting or reconstituting themselves in this new way of being, men may take on feminine roles, speak through female personae and yearn for their male god as women do for their lovers. Women saints may take on the characteristics of men: they leave the house questing for their personal god (not their husband's or father's) and a community of their own choosing, in ways that shatter rule after rule in Manu's code book. They become the third gender of my title: men, women, and saints.

Several kinds of explanations offer themselves for this feminising of the male saint and the ritual elaboration for ordinary males. Carl Jung would speak of coming to terms with the feminine in oneself, the effort to accept one's androgyny. But androgyny, like that of Ardhanārīśvara, the form of Śiva who is half woman, is a male phenomenon. Only males feel the need to be androgynes—all the androgynous gods I know are male-based.

A second interesting explanation is a post-Freudian one. In Bruno

Bettelheim's *Symbolic Wounds* and Kubie's 'drive to be the other sex', as women (according to the Freudian view) have a penis-envy, males have an envy of child-bearing, a womb-envy. Males envy, apparently, the periods of seclusion, withdrawal, inwardness, often institutionalised in old and traditional societies, during menstruation. The 'symbolic wounds' of initiation, for the male adolescent, may be such an imitation of womanhood. In many Australian, African, and Indian tribal rites, the male initiates are dressed as females (rarely, the other way round). Various symbolic acts are performed, including making a slit and shedding blood, cutting off the foreskin, pulling a tooth out, with women as ritual receivers. The most striking of all is subincision—where a long cut is made in the male genital, 'to give the neophyte a female organ', according to Margaret Mead. The novice is then called 'the one with the vulva'.

Witness also the many stories regarding the superiority of the female in sexual experience (Yuvanāśva in the *Mahābhārata*, Tiresias in Greek myth), and the myths of heroes becoming pregnant or becoming women or effeminate (Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā), at least for a while in a phase of exile or liminal secrecy, or the feast of Holi where all roles are reversed in a period of liminal merriment or seminal confusion or transfusion. In the well-known instance of couvade, the woman gives birth to a child and then goes about her business while the father takes to his hammock, abstains from work, meat, all food, except weak gruel; abstains from smoking and washing himself and touching any weapons; he is nursed and coddled by all the women of the place for days, even weeks. Couvade, says Bruno Bettelheim is, 'a denial of biological difference', 'assimilation to an alien role', playing the envied woman. 'Aping the superficials, emphasizes how much the real, essential powers are envied. . . . Woman, satisfied with the real experience, secure, can agree to the couvade; men need it to fill the emotional vacuum created by their inability to bear children.' A couvade-like phenomenon has been reported often in American hospitals for males. Investigation shows that the males are from one-parent families, and identify with their mothers.

As several post-Freudian psychologists such as Bettelheim and Erich Fromm have argued, each sex envies the other. Each is the Other for the other. Kubie wrote of the drive to be the other sex. The less dominant sex envies the dominant and in most cultures the male is the dominant, but in the culture of the family, the boy's identification with the mother results in an attitude of envy and rivalry and inferiority in the matter of child-bearing. A girl's problems are different. She is continuous with her mother, she is like her. Freud does not make anything of this feature, with

his Victorian androcentric bias. As it is rarely allowed expression elsewhere, one sees it in schizophrenia, transvestism, and rituals like the couvade.

The conversion and other experiences of the saints often parallel initiatory and other rituals—transvestism, role-reversals, humiliation, nakedness (in both male and female saints), assimilation to ghosts, being made or called crazy till one's normal intelligence and everyday orientation is transmuted. Or going all the way to risk death so that one may be reborn: Arunagiri, after an utterly disgraceful and dissolute life, throws himself down a tall cliff in despair—and wakes up in the arms of an old man (his god, Murugan), who also gives him his first verse. Or he or she often learns a new idiom (sometimes secret and mystical, as when some saints use a twilight language or *sandhyābhāṣā*), gets a new name, forgetting entirely the old one, the old name being known only to scholars—like Maran for the more familiar Nammāḻvār. Furthermore, schizophrenic children (in whom 'the unconscious is conscious', as Fenichel says) wish very much to have a female organ or both kinds. Not only do saints like St John of the Cross, Vidyāpati and Nammāḻvār go transvestite in poetry, as the *paṇḍās* of the Puri temple do actually, and write passionate poems from the vantage point of *gopīs* in love with Kṛṣṇa, suffering and enjoying 'symbolic wounds' like the African initiates—in classical Tamil, three-fourths of the dramatic love poems by male poets are put in the mouths of women.

This taking on of a woman's persona by male poets and saints has, thus, multiple meanings: to become bisexual, whole and androgynous like the gods themselves (Puruṣa, Śiva, and Viṣṇu); in a male-dominated society, it serves also to abase and reverse oneself, rid oneself of machismo, to enter a liminal confusion, become open and receptive as a woman to god; and it is possibly also a poetic expression of the male envy and admiration of woman.

Saints are both representatives of and alternatives to the culture. They express society's ideals and defy society's norms. Thus the saint is the Other for ordinary men and women. He or she is in a dialectical relationship to the rest of society. As in that rich expressive series, neuroses, schizophrenia, dream, art and ritual, we may see the return of the repressed in the lives of the saints as well—except that they belong to the positive expressive side of the spectrum, as neurosis and schizophrenia are on the negative symptomatic side. Psychoanalysts rightly see sainthood and religion, myth and art as part of the same series as symptom, neurosis, and dream, but wrongly confuse the former with the latter. As

later Freudians (and Freud himself, when he talked of art and sublimation) said, there is such a thing as 'creative regression in the service of the ego'—and, at the same time, in the service of the culture. After he has seen both male and female from the inside, the saint (and through him, we too) may say with Dāsimayya:

If they see
breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,

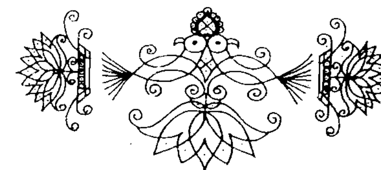
if beard and whiskers,
they call it man:

but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman

O Rāmanātha

Dēvara Dāsimayya 133 (Ramanujan 1973)

The Myths of *Bhakti*: Images of Śiva in Śaiva Poetry



In this essay I shall expand on some passing suggestions I have made elsewhere, note some features of Vīraśaiva poetry, such as its subliminal use of mythic images, and illustrate the intimate, innovative images of Śiva in the lives of the saints (Dimock and others 1975; Ramanujan 1973).

The major Vīraśaiva poets do not pay much explicit attention to the mythological Śiva. They are iconoclastic. Their Śiva is generally aniconic, though not entirely *nirguṇa* or without attributes, as we shall see. The distinction iconic/aniconic is a useful one, as *nirguṇa/saguṇa* is not. All devotional poetry plays on the tension between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*, the lord as person and the lord as principle. If he were entirely a person, he would not be divine, and if he were entirely a principle, a godhead, one could not make poems about him. The former attitude makes *dvaita* or dualism possible, and the latter makes for *advaita* or monism. The Vīraśaivas rightly call their attitude a combination, *dvaitādvaita*, a dualistic monism. The Vaiṣṇavas, too, say that the lord is characterised by both *paratva*, 'otherness', and *saulabhya*, 'ease of access'; he is both here and beyond, both tangible as a person and intangible as a principle—such is the nature of the ground of all being. It is not either/or, but both/and; myth, *bhakti*, and poetry would be impossible without the presence of both attitudes.

If He says
He has to go away
to fight battles at the front
I understand and can be quiet.

But how can I bear it
when He is here in my hands

right here in my heart
    and will not take me?

O mind, O memory of pasts,
if you will not help me get to Him
how can I ever bear it?

Mahādevyyakkā 318 (Ramanujan 1973, 137)

Bhakti poetry may be intensely iconic, like that of the early Tamil Śaivas, or intensely, even defiantly aniconic, like that of the Vīraśaivas. For instance, the Tamil poetry of Appar (seventh century) has references to Śiva's attributes, shrines, exploits, and so forth, in almost every poem: a glance at a concordance confirms this impression. But in the poetry of Basavaṇṇa, Śiva's name occurs less frequently than forms like Śiva *patha*, 'the path of Śiva', Śiva *jñāna*, 'knowledge of Śiva', Śiva *nāma*, 'the name of Śiva (to be chanted)', and so on. The word *liṅga*, the symbol of an aniconic Śiva, occurs twice as often as the word Śiva. And the descriptions of *śaraṇa*, or the devotee who has surrendered to the lord, are full and frequent—again, twice as frequent as the name Śiva.[1]

The reason for these emphases is clear: Vīraśaiva poetry is about the worshipping subject, not the object of worship. Vedic hymns, Upaniṣadic speculations, describe god. But this *bhakti* poetry describes the inner movements of the speaker's heart. Such poetry assumes Śiva, agonises over the speaker's struggles, the stages of his snakes-and-ladders game with his god; he loves, hates, prays, suffers, and addresses it all to his god. I would hazard a guess that poets who are confident of their god, like Appar and Nammāḻvār, describe him a great deal; and poets who concentrate on the hardships of *bhakti* describe their own feelings and shortcomings as if they could not help doing so.

Yet, to the Vīraśaivas, Śiva is not an abstract principle—he is intensely individuated. For one thing, Śiva is supreme—all other gods are forms or parts of him, or subordinate to him; to equate him with any other god is a sin. Myths are used to distinguish him. As Basavaṇṇa says, 'Viṣṇu is chock full of *karma*: Śiva alone is free.'

If you say Hari and Hara (Viṣṇu and Śiva) are one,
wouldn't your mouth
crawl with wriggling worms?
Viṣṇu goes through ten deluges,
Brahmā's deluges are endless.
Tell me, is Śiva subject to any at all?

Basavaṇṇa 542 (my translation)

In one of his rare verses with a mythological motif, Basavaṇṇa says,

When the ghosts read the writing on the skulls
Śiva wears around his neck,
they know, 'This one is Brahmā, this one is Viṣṇu,
this one is Indra, this is Death,'
and as they play happily with them,
Śiva smiles, he laughs, our god.

Basavaṇṇa 537 (my translation)

His name is special, effective above all others.

Isn't the mention of Śiva enough
to wipe out a hundred million sins?

Basavaṇṇa 84 (my translation)

Śiva is further individuated by the signature lines of individual poets. Each chooses an aspect that fits his or her preoccupations: Allama, most abstract and masterful of saints, deeply mystical and metaphysical, involved in paradoxical images of darkness and light, aptly calls his Śiva *guhēśvara*, 'lord of caves.'

Light
devoured darkness.

I was alone
inside.

Shedding
the visible dark

I
was Your target

O Lord of Caves.

Allama Prabhu 675 (Ramanujan 1973, 164)

Basavaṇṇa, social reformer, interested in communion, and the community of devotees from every caste and class, calls his god *kuḍalasaṅgamadeva*, 'lord of the meeting rivers'. Mahādevyyakkā, in love with the god, has eyes only for his beauty. She addresses him as *cennamallikārjuna*, 'lovely lord white as jasmine'. We must remember that all these names refer to local icons in the temples of the region, to the local manifestations of Śiva. The poems, however abstract or aniconic or *nirguṇa*, end with these signature lines which ground and root the god in the speaker's deepest concerns and localise a translocal divinity.

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Śiva mythology, though it is not the explicit subject of the Vīraśaiva saints, shapes the poems and their sequences. Conceptions often shadowy and implicit in the myths are given body and feeling. The epithets and motifs become personal images. What happens to someone else in a mythic scenario happens to the speaker in the poems.

One of Śiva's names is *paśupati*, 'lord of beasts'. He rides a bull, a *paśu*.

Like a cow fallen into a quagmire
I make mouths at this corner and that,

no one to look for me
or find me

till my lord sees this beast
and lifts him out by the horns.

Basavaṇṇa 52 (Ramanujan 1973, 69)

It should be noted that the name Basava itself means 'a bull', a *vṛṣabha*. In another poem, Basavaṇṇa sees Śiva as a watchful mother:

As a mother runs
close behind her child
with his hand on a cobra
or a fire,

the lord of the meeting rivers
stays with me
every step of the way
and looks after me.

Basavaṇṇa 70 (Ramanujan 1973, 71)

Behind this poem resonates, like the unstruck strings of a sitar (for me at least), the legend of Tiruccirāppaḷḷi.

STORY OF MĀTṚBHŪTAM

A devotee's daughter was about to give birth to her first child. Her mother could not cross the flooding Kāveri River and come in time to help her waiting daughter. So Śiva took the form of the old mother—'back bent like the crescent moon, hair white as moonlight, a bamboo staff in hand'—and came to her house. Umā and Gaṅgā had been sent ahead with bundles. When labour began, Śiva played midwife; a boy was born and Mother Śiva cradled and cared for him as if he were Murugan. Soon the floods abated, and the real mother appeared on the doorstep. Śiva began to slip away. Seeing the two women, the young couple were amazed: 'Which is my mother?' cried the girl. Before her eyes, Śiva disappeared into the sky like lightning.[2]

In the following poem, Basavaṇṇa says:

Make of my body the beam of a lute
of my head the sounding gourd
of my nerves the strings
of my fingers the plucking rods.

Clutch me close
and play your thirty-two songs
O lord of the meeting rivers!

Basavaṇṇa 500 (Ramanujan 1973, 83)

Here the devotee seems to have a submerged mythic precedent, no other than Rāvaṇa, the original music maker, who 'tore off one of his heads and made a *vīṇā*, using the tendons of his forearms for strings, and the music he sang appeased Śiva,' according to a Tamil temple myth (Shulman 1980, 323).

The famous poem about temples says:

The rich
will make temples for Śiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving ever shall stay.

Basavaṇṇa 820 (Ramanujan 1973, 88)

This is no mere conceptual defiance and ideological reversal. When Ghaṇṭākarṇa learned from his own god Viṣṇu that Śiva was indeed supreme, he gave himself to Śiva. His body became the threshold of a Śiva temple, his limbs became the doorframe, and his head became the temple bell.[3] As the temple is the body of the god, the body of the devotee is the temple of the god. Basavaṇṇa wants the live body to stir in the stone temple; Ghaṇṭākarṇa wants his body to die into stone sacred to Śiva.

Poems like the above 'introject', while the myths 'project'. Myth and poem draw on the same storehouse—each vivifies the other. One is collective, the other individual—the relation between them is somewhat like the relation between myth and dream. In Ghaṇṭākarṇa's story, the myth (like some kinds of ritual and folk practice) literalises the poetic metaphor. It seems to be one more case of life imitating art.

The most extraordinary examples of lurking mythology are in the poetry of the woman saint, Mahādevyyakkā. Though she almost never alludes to Śiva mythology, never once mentions her true rival Pārvatī (with one exception, cited below), Pārvatī glimmers behind her as a model. Her heart is set on him, she pines for him obsessively, as only Umā did.

Listen, sister, listen.
I had a dream.

I saw rice, betel, palm leaf
and coconut.
I saw an ascetic
come to beg,
white teeth and small matted curls.

I followed on his heels
and held his hand,
he who goes breaking
all bounds and beyond.

I saw the lord, white as jasmine,
and woke wide open.

Mahādevyyakkā 87 (Ramanujan 1973, 124)

In her poetry, the grotesque Śiva is never seen. He is transformed into a royal lover—as Śiva was at his wedding.

Locks of shining red hair
a crown of diamonds
small beautiful teeth
and eyes in a laughing face
that light up fourteen worlds—
I saw His glory,
and seeing, I quell today
the famine in my eyes. . . .

Mahādevyyakkā 68 (Ramanujan 1973, 120)

Like Pārvatī, Akkā goes against parents and convention; thinks of Śiva as her only husband, captivated by his very lack of eligibility; she sees in his attributelessness an attribute of extraordinary beauty. You may remember how, in the *Purāṇas*, Śiva in disguise tells Umā's father Himālaya: 'Śiva has no wealth, attachments, no good looks or qualities. He is an old man, free from passion, a wanderer and a beggar, not at all suitable for Pārvatī to marry. Ask your wife and your relatives—anyone but Pārvatī.' And again, his speech to Pārvatī herself: 'Śiva is devoid of all pleasures, has no house or relatives or enjoyments or erotic life, and never has a wife or son. Yet for some reason you want him for your husband. . . . Why should a woman want for her husband a man who destroys everything?' (O'Flaherty 1973, 224 ff.). Umā's answer is, in Mahādevī's wonderful words:

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end nor birthmarks.
I love him O mother. Listen.

I love the Beautiful One
with no bond nor fear
no clan no land
no landmarks
for his beauty.
So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.

Take these husbands who die,
decay, and feed them
to your kitchen fires!

Mahādevyyakkā 283 (Ramanujan 1973, 134)

Here, his *nirguṇa* becomes his supreme *guṇa*, his virtue, his beauty.

The myths play with great humour on Śiva's grotesque ornaments: his bloody elephant skin, his funeral-pyre ashes, his three eyes, inauspicious skulls, matted hair, his body crawling with serpents. Folk *bhakti* also makes capital out of Pārvatī's love for such a wild maverick; Pārvatī's mother asks:

What made you fall in love with him? . . .
Was it for the wedding gifts his nonexistent parents will bring?
Or for the moon in his locks and the blazing eye in his forehead?

Or for killing Kāma, or for swallowing poison? . . .
Was it for the tiger skin he stripped and wore as a shawl?
Or his foolhardy courage in holding blazing embers in his strong hands?
Or for grabbing the big snakes to drape around his neck as garlands?
Or for the sari he would get you by begging?
Or for the deeds he wrought or his lovesports?
What made you fall in love?

But, as in the Śiva story, Śiva transforms all these on his wedding day: the skulls become a necklace, the third eye a *tilaka*, the serpents ornaments ('changing only their bodies, retaining the jewels in their hoods') (O'Flaherty 1973, 39). So too in Akkā's poems, Śiva is transformed. One sees only the beauty of Śiva, the lover. Here one more surprising strand should be noted. In Mahādevyyakkā, he takes on the allure of a Kṛṣṇa figure, to whom all men are as women:

Locks of shining red hair
a crown of diamonds
small beautiful teeth
and eyes in a laughing face
that light up fourteen worlds—
I saw His glory,
and seeing, I quell today
the famine in my eyes.

I saw the haughty Master
for whom men, all men,
are but women, wives.

I saw the Great One
who plays at love
with Śakti,
original to the world,

I saw His stance
and began to live.

Mahādevyyakkā 68 (Ramanujan 1973, 120)

Mahādevyyakkā, who has cast off her clothes in defiance of the society around her, throwing away her last investment in the social world, longs to be married to Śiva and brought to the bridal bed—reminding one again of the *gopīs*, and the allegory of Kṛṣṇa stealing their clothes, making them come to him naked. Mahādevī speaks for other devotees in their sensual passion for divine union:

Riding the blue sapphire mountains
wearing moonstone for slippers
blowing long horns
O Śiva
when shall I
crush you on my pitcher breasts?

O lord white as jasmine
when do I join you
stripped of body's shame
and heart's modesty?

Mahādevyyakkā 317 (Ramanujan 1973, 136)

Here, as elsewhere, despite the overt Śaiva antagonism to Viṣṇu, the imagery is shared.

Not only does Śiva mythology quicken and shape the most noniconic poetry of the Vīraśaivas, but new myths come into being with the *bhakti* poets—not so much in their poems as in the poems and stories about them. Śiva enters their lives, saves their marriages, tests them in extreme, violent, ironic, often comic ways, and shows them special grace. In Tamilnadu, he becomes identified with Tamil grammar and poetry. Śiva (like Murugan̲) is identified with the Tamil country. In the *Tiruviḷaiyāṭarpurāṇam*, Śiva is incarnate as the Pāṇḍiya king of Madurai; he is called *ten̲n̲avar*, 'the Southern One'. In answer to a sage's question, he answers, 'We shall dance that [cosmic] dance here too. For the god who has the world as his body, *tillai* is the heart. This Madurai is the twelfth and ultimate station (*tuvācāntam*) of his soul.' He later expands it to equate the seven holy places of Tamilnadu (Tiruvārur, Tiruvān̲aikkā, Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, Tillai or Cidambaram, Kāśi [probably Ten̲kāsi], Tirukkāḷatti, and Tirukkayilai) with the seven centres (*cakras*) of his body. Thus Tamil country is Śiva's own yogic body. Śiva and Murugan̲ are members of the first fraternity (*caṅkam*) of Tamil poets, and reappear in the third. The second love poem in *Kuruntokai*, probably the earliest Tamil anthology, is assigned to Śiva; he composed it for his devotee Tarumi and helped him win a prize for poetry. Agastya, a form of Śiva, is the legendary author of the first Tamil grammar.

Śiva enters the saints' lives in all sorts of ways. For one thing, he possesses them like any village god or backwoods ghost. Maṇikkavācakar (a ninth-century Tamil Śaiva saint) describes the violence of such a possession.

He grabbed me
lest I go astray.

Wax before an unspent fire,
mind melted,
body trembled.

I bowed, I wept,
danced, cried aloud,
I sang, and I praised Him.

Unyielding, as they say,
as an elephant's jaw
or a woman's grasp,
was love's unrelenting
seizure.

Love pierced me
like a nail
driven into a green tree.

Overflowing, I tossed
like a sea,

heart growing tender,
body shivering,

while the world called me Demon!
and laughed at me,

I left shame behind,
took as an ornament
the mockery of the local folk.

Unswerving, I lost my cleverness
in the bewilderment of ecstasy.

In Tirunlakaṇḍar's case, he was the marriage counsellor. Tirunlakaṇḍar was estranged from his wife for ninety years because she misunderstood a courtesan's innocent courtesy to her devout husband and asked him in Śiva's name never to touch her. Even Śiva, 'erotic ascetic', thought ninety years of married celibacy was a bit much. So he came down as an old man and gave them his begging bowl for safe-keeping. But the bowl vanished from Tirunlakaṇḍar's locked box, and the irate old man took them to court. He said he would believe them only if the couple took an oath together in the holy tank. When they would not hold each other's hands for the oath, he taunted them, and finally conceded that they could

hold the two ends of a stick while they took the ritual dip. As they shamefacedly did so, they were transformed into happy sixteen-year-olds—and returned to youthful, loving, married life.

There are also the well-known stories of Śiva becoming the disciple of a devotee (Tiruñāṇa Sambandar). Sambandar was old, the pupil was a bit dumb. Once when the disciple made a mistake, the old man hit him on the head—when Śiva (probably because he could not stand it any more) showed him his divine form and took him to Kailāsa. . . . The old woman saint Avvai made cakes (*puṭṭu*) for a living. One of the Cōḷa kings was building an embankment and had drafted everyone in town to carry dirt and mortar. When the old woman's turn came, Śiva came down as a Reddy and agreed to work in her stead for a piece of her cake. He was a jolly man full of jokes at his coolie labour. The king's servants did not like his merry ways and gave him a few lashes. But they felt the sting of the lashes on their own backs. When the king came to see what the trouble was, he realised that the merry construction worker was no other than Śiva. He had to fall at the feet of the old Avvai, and listen to Śiva's praises of her before Śiva showed himself in his true form. As elsewhere, here too Śiva plays the prankster, laughs at the world of work and propriety. In another version, where Śiva sends the flood and also appears as an erratic labourer to substitute for an old woman, he eats her cakes all day, trips the other workers, jumps into the river for a swim, or takes a nap. When the overseers complain to the king, he strikes the mad labourer—and the entire universe reels from the blow. Then they raise their eyes to find that the labourer had disappeared and the dike had risen up to heaven. Śiva both causes the deluge and saves the city from it (Shulman 1980, 76–7).

Śiva as labourer and underdog fits the Śaiva, especially Vīraśaiva, emphases on work as worship (*kayakave Kailāsa*): every Vīraśaiva saint's life, and often his name, prominently mentions the way he makes his living; for example, Mācayya the Washerman, Caudayya the Ferryman, and so on.

Śiva in these myths is one with his devotees. The Vīraśaiva potter saint Guṇḍayya used to pat his clay and dance to the rhythm of this patting. Once, Śiva, in Kailāsa, was enjoying this dance and nodding his head. Pārvatī, too, wanted to see the dance. Śiva 'parked' her in the sky and came to visit his devotee; Guṇḍayya's blissful dance affected Śiva so he could not help dancing with him. With him danced all his crazy hosts of goblins, and with them the entire world.

His dealings with his people are not always this pleasant. He gives them tests and ordeals, subjects them to unnatural acts, unspeakable offenses. Many are the saints who give not only their eyeteeth, but their very eyes for Śiva. Kaṇṇappar, the naive hunter saint, is the celebrated example. He found a Śiva image in the jungle and asked, 'Why are you sitting alone here? Come with me.' When the image would not move, Kaṇṇappar thought it was faint with hunger, so he hunted animals (who were really *rākṣasas* offering their bodies as sacrifice to Śiva), and brought meat to the temple. Kaṇṇappar contemptuously kicked aside the brahman priest's vegetarian offerings to Śiva, in his innocence offered him fresh meat, and washed the image with his spit. When the brahman priest came, Śiva's eye began to bleed. The terrified priest fled, reading it as an omen of pestilence and disaster. When Kaṇṇappar saw the bleeding eye, he gouged out his own and replaced the god's. When Śiva's second eye also bled, Kaṇṇappar plucked out his remaining eye: Śiva was pleased and gave him salvation.

As Dāsimayya says:

He will make them roam the streets;
scrape them on stone for color of gold;
grind them for sandal;
like a stick of sugarcane
he will slash them to look inside.

If they do not wince or shudder,
he will pick them up by the hands,

will our Rāmanātha.

Dēvara Dāsimayya 90 (Ramanujan 1973, 104)

This aspect fits very well with the Vīraśaiva view that *bhakti* is not easy: 'like a saw / it cuts when it goes / and it cuts again / when it comes' (Basavaṇṇa 212; Ramanujan 1973, 79). In another ordeal of mounting and gruesome suspense and irony, Śiva disguised as a Bhairava, appears to Ciruttoṇḍar, who is looking for a ritual guest. He tells the devotee that it is his custom to eat a cow once every six months, 'a human cow', especially an only male child, cooked into a curry by the child's own parents—and today was such a day. Ciruttoṇḍar invites him home, calls his only son in, and with his devoted wife cuts him up and cooks the human flesh into a curry. When he is about to serve it to his strange guest, the guest asks them to join him in the meal. When they are about to begin, he asks, 'Where is your son? Call him too.' Ciruttoṇḍar and his wife faithfully go outdoors and call their son, who comes running in. In some versions (the tale is told in Telugu, Tamil, and Kannada), different parts of the child's body smell of different spices as he comes in. Śiva then appears with Pārvatī and his sons, and takes the whole family to Kailāsa.

In another temple legend, Śiva, disguised as a brahman, asks for the devotee's wife. The devotee, Iyaṟpahaiyār ('enemy of nature'), gives the brahman his wife, and escorts him to the city gates where he is attacked by a crowd of relatives. Iyaṟpahaiyār kills them all with his sword and goes back. He hears the stranger calling out again for help and turns around to see Śiva and Umā on their bull in the sky. Śiva takes the devotee, his wife, and all his dead relatives to heaven (Shulman 1980, 158).

Women are asked to give up husbands, children their precious chastity. In one case, Śiva calls his devotee when she is enjoying sex with her husband; she leaves her husband at once, and goes with Śiva (this and the following legends are drawn from Śāmarāya 1967).

In some cases, the tests have comic consequences and Śiva gets beaten. Sometimes, the devotee sees through the disguise. When Śiva in partial disguise asks Basavaṇṇa to get him a third eye for his forehead, Basava shows him a mirror.

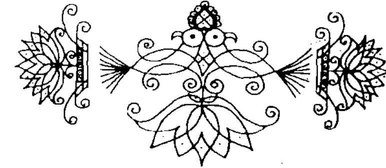
Kakkayya made his living by devoutly playing the tambourine and offering his earnings to Śiva. Once, when he was playing, Śiva in disguise danced to the tune of the tambourine. The devotee didn't stop for three days. Finally Śiva gave up, but Kakkayya wouldn't let him stop. Śiva had to show him his true form. When he asked Kakkayya what boon he wanted, Kakkayya wanted none, but only wanted to be paid for his three days of drumming. He also refused to go with Śiva to heaven, but preferred to live among Śiva's devotees.

When a devotee (Kalāvatiçarana) suffered from poverty and couldn't make his offerings, he decided to fast to death. Śiva counselled him in a dream to become a highway robber and waylay rich passersby. The next day he waylaid and beat up Śiva himself, who was on the road in the guise of a merchant.

In another legend, which I cannot resist repeating here, a Śiva saint was a great proselytizer. He converted those of this world by any means whatever—love, money, brute force. One day Śiva came down in disguise to test him, but the devotee did not recognise Śiva and proceeded to convert him, forcing holy ash on the reluctant-seeming god. When his zeal became too oppressive, Śiva tried to tell him who he was, but the baptism of ash was still forced on him. Even Śiva had to become a Śaiva.

As one can see, Śiva's playfulness, even his love of violent pranks, are intimately extended into the ordinary human realm. Very little of the erotic/ascetic Śiva is seen here. When he grants his well-tested devotees their final salvation, he often appears as a householder, with his entire family, and takes them, kin, clan, and all, to his Kailāsa.

Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle: An Anthological Essay



Sir, if a man has experienced the inexpressible, he is under no obligation to express it.

Dr Johnson

I

In an earlier work, I've written about Vīraśaiva *bhakti* in some detail (Ramanujan 1973). For instance, in the poems of Basava, the saint-poet rejects caste, ritual, temples, sacred space and sacred time, the Vedas, and the *śāstras* (systematised knowledge). I suggested that all these add up to what we would call 'structure' and structure implies predictability. A grammar, a structural description, codifies what is predictable in a language. With grammar we render a language predictable, we feel then that we can control it, teach it, see it as a code we have observed or broken, relegating the rest to lexicon, idiom, and idiosyncrasy. But in the conception of these saints, the experience of god, *anubhāva* as against *anubhava*, Experience with a capital E as against experience with a lower case e, is not predictable; it cannot be captured in scripture nor explained by the *śāstras*. It cannot be coaxed, wheedled, enforced by any technique. It is not amenable to 'magic' in the strict sense, of which rituals and 'techniques of ecstasy' (Mircea Eliade's phrase) are a part. The most radical Vīraśaivas won't have anything to do with such manipulations. Only miracle, grace, the 'unmediated vision' will do for them. So they are against all structure—which seeks to predict, construct, domesticate, and banalise the experience of god. Taking issue with Victor Turner's earlier formulations, I had suggested that this was an instance of anti-'structure', opposed to the very idea of structure, not itself an example

of anti-structure or a way of being without any structure. For the culture and community of these radical saints did have (inevitably) a structure of its own, an oppositional counter-structure made up of selected elements from the very structure they railed against. Only one of these oppositional elements, the suspicion and rejection of language, is my concern here.

The most radical and imperious of these rejectors of structure (social, intellectual, religious) is Allama Prabhu. Though passionate, he is imperious in tone (see Ramanujan 1973, 143–68). Of the four major Vīraśaiva saints (Basavaṇṇa, Devara Dāsimayya, Mahādevyyakkā, Allama) he alone composes many *bedagina vacanas* or 'fancy poems', obscure riddle-like questioning poems that participate in an ancient and pan-Indian tradition of *sandhyābhāṣā* or 'twilight language', or *ulatbāṁsī*, 'reversed or topsy-turvy language'—examples of which go back to the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, and in the mother tongues to the *caryāgītis* (Ramanujan 1973, 48–9). Allama probably predates the *caryāgītis*. I'd suspect the presence of a wide network of Nātha and other esoteric cults with a common pool saturate with ideas, motifs, paradoxes, imagery and poetic genres in which poets like Allama steeped their poetic works and brought them up encrusted with crystals. So, unlike the modern surrealists, they did not depend on dreams, automatic writing, ouija boards and other ways of enticing the unconscious. To Allama, as to Kabīr and the Tamil Siddhas, a second language other than their own Kannada, Bhojpuri or Tamil was ready to hand. This second language may draw on the vocabulary of *yoga, tantra*, Nātha practice and imagery, even while rejecting them as systems and techniques. I shall return to this theme.

This second language, this language within language, contrasts with other such second languages. For instance, *saguṇa* poets, poets who devote themselves to god in his well-formed states, gods with bodies, parts and passions, share another such second language—that of myths, temples, holy places, lists of holy names and attributes, and the motifs and genres of erotic poetry. *Saguṇa* poets like Cuntarar or Nammāḻvār in Tamil, Sūr in Hindi, Mahādevī in Kannada, Vidyāpatī in Bengali may all use parts of this other second language to sing, praise, scold, invoke, and certainly describe, not just circumscribe, their gods, whether Śiva or Viṣṇu. Their gods are *saguṇa*, have qualities and forms: as said earlier, they have 'body, parts, passion', have *avatāras* or incarnations, and *lilas* or sports. Temples, icons, mythologies, and poems of love and praise are their regular domain. To these poet-saints, becoming one with their god is not the goal. As one of them said, 'If you become sugar yourself, how

can you taste it?' Seeing, hearing, especially touching, tasting and smelling, intensifying all the senses and feelings especially in sexual intimacy—these are characteristic modes of their experience. Sensation, desire, feelings of all kinds in the I-Thou mode are the staple of these poems. Not only characters, complexions, tones of voice, but contagion, communion, community, and congregation are central to this way of seeking and being with god.

The imagery of an Allama poem has none of this. The nearest he comes to it is in a poem like the following:

Looking for your light,
I went out:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,

a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

Lord of caves, if you are light,
there can be no metaphor.

Allama Prabhu 972 (Ramanujan 1973, 168)

While Nammāḻvār never tires of describing his god, Allama despairs of language and even of poetry and makes a poem (like other poets) of not being able to make a poem. Note how he uses a famous metaphor for the vision of god, 'a ganglion of lightnings' (made famous by the *Gītā* which even made the news when Oppenheimer quoted it when he first saw the world-destroying flash of atomic fission), and how then Allama negates it in the last line.

Metaphor, self-contradiction, oxymoron, and paradox are all used by Allama separately as well as parts of his riddle-poems. These figures are what Sanskrit poeticians would call *arthālaṁkāra* or figures of sense, figures of thought (in contrast to *śabdālaṁkāra* or figures of sound, like alliteration, assonance, etc.). Figures of sense play with the logical syntax of language, with linguistic relationships. As Roman Jakobson showed, metaphoric figures are paradigmatic, metonymic figures are syntagmatic (1987). These two basic dimensions are, of course, not independent of each other; they are also variously projected onto each other, especially in poetry: lists project the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic, parallelisms project the syntagmatic on to the paradigmatic.

Metaphor, oxymoron, and paradox have a logical structure in common—and riddles use all three figures. For instance, the riddle 'It's a

house without a door, what's it?' turns on the metaphor 'house without a door'. We know it is a metaphor once we know the answer, 'It's an egg'. Riddles use the familiar taken-for-granted dichotomies of the culture and the language: for instance, cultural objects/ natural objects (here, house/ egg). One is described as the other, resulting in a metaphor. The two objects have a common semantic feature: a house and an egg both enclose space.

But houses must have doors, by definition; a house without a door is a self-contradiction. It is also a paradox, because it goes against common knowledge ('common sense' or *sensus communis*) within the culture. Paradox requires a *sensus communis*, oxymoron does not. The two are often mixed.

All three figures which meet in this riddle, can occur separately, and outside riddles:

> 'That house is egg-shaped' is a metaphor.
> 'Nothing fails like success' (Oscar Wilde) is an oxymoron (and a paradox).
> 'Lead us not into the paths of virtue,' (Wilde) or 'the seven deadly virtues' is a paradox, because it flouts a culture's values.

They all depend on a common logical form, '*A* has a feature *f*.' If *B* also has a feature *f*, we have the basis for a metaphor. If *A* has a feature, but also has a feature *-f*, we have an oxymoron. 'You all think *A* has a feature *f*, but here it doesn't', is the basis of a paradox. Metaphors are based on the assertion of a feature; oxymorons and paradoxes depend on negations.

Allama is quite aware of his use of riddle-forms: he often ends his poems with a challenge formula that belongs to riddles proper: *hela*, 'tell me (what it means)', or *helaballavararu*?, 'who can tell me?' or 'only those who can tell me what this is know what truth is like.'

Saguṇa saint-poets, to my knowledge, don't often pose these riddles. Cuntarar in Tamil, Basava or Akkā in Kannada, Nammāḻvār in Tamil, Vidyāpatī in Bengali are not known for their riddle-poems as Kabīr in Hindi, Allama in Kannada, Lālon Shāh in Bengali, or the Cittars in Tamil are. The latter are *nirguṇa* poets: they believe that god is 'formless', 'beyond words', etc. They negate the world of *nāma* and *rupā*, names and forms, not only for god. They see names and forms (Hindu categorical imperatives?) as creating illusions in man's phenomenal world. So they have little use for *mantra*, *tantra*, and other such 'techniques of ecstasy', for speculations and thought-systems like theologies and Śāstras and the

Vedas, as well as for symbol-systems like language, poetry, figures of speech, mythologies—i.e., everything that poets, thinkers, and religious men live on, live off, are seen as things worthy to be shed. Yet these Nay-sayers have to say Nay in language, poetry, figure, and literary genre. For 'negation', as Kenneth Burke says, is not to be found in nature but only in language. It actually requires language. Moreover, to negate one has to first name, mention, thereby affirm the existence of what is negated—as in Freud's example, 'I had a dream about someone and she didn't at all look like my mother.' Negations affirm, as both Freud and Śaṅkara tell us. It's like the magic carpet story. A man bought a carpet and the seller told him that it will fly on one condition: the man who sits on it should never think of flying. Of course, the carpet never left the ground.

II

There are two kinds of poems in the Allama *oeuvre*: those that describe by negating description and those that describe an experience in positive terms. Here are some examples.

> The light in the eye cannot be imagined
> The sound in the ear cannot be described
> The taste in the tongue cannot find its counterparts
> The central nerve (*susumna*) vital to awareness cannot be proved:
>
> In atom, particle, in grass, in wood,
> subtle, without end and without bottom (*nirala*),
> dwells our lord of caves.
>
> (Basavaraju 1960, no. 67; my translation)

> In the black iris of the eye, fourteen worlds.
> The show puts on its show:
> look at the strings that move the puppets!
> And that energy in the depths of stillness (*nirala*),
> that's the lord of caves.
>
> (Basavaraju 1960, no. 68; my translation)

Unlike the poems of other Vīraśaiva saints, Allama's poems speak for the man who has known Union, speaks of Union more than the mystic's ascent, descent or the struggle towards it. He is the butterfly who has forgotten he was once the caterpillar, in Kierkegaard's phrase in another context.

It's not an image, no *murthi* made of the body
nor of life and breath,
not an image made by past good deeds, nor of liberation,
not an image made by the ages and aeons,
not made of Śiva, not made of Śakti:

how can I then metaphor this image?
A body that cannot be seen,
a lustre that cannot be envisioned,
a stance for which there are no metaphors:

how can I speak, O lord of caves,
of this joy made visible
and how can I speak of causes?

(Bhusnurmath and Menezes 1968, no. 33; my translation)

All the cultural baggage of concepts—body, breath, good deeds, liberation, ages, Śiva and Śakti, vision, metaphor, finally the logic of causation—all of it is negated and jettisoned. The joy that the poem speaks of is defined by negations, not described but circumscribed by all that it's not.

Devotee, devotee, they cry!
Before they shed their dependence on earth,
on water,
on light,
on air,
on sky and sun and moon,
and on the soul (*atma*)

they call themselves devotees
who worship the *liṅga*,
and I'm amazed at them,
O lord of caves.

(Bhusnurmath and Menezes 1968, no. 60; my translation)

Such experience is without precedent, without models, as the next poem says:

There has been nothing like this before:
had it been so, how could this be?
It is because it isn't,
so it has happened this way.

Like longings from all directions,
reaching their end,
that *liṅga* of the lord of caves,
took my body towards it.

Because it has never happened before, it has no language.

When the *liṅga* that cannot be seen
came to my hand,
I cannot speak, I cannot ask.
This to me is a wonder of wonders.
That *liṅga* called the lord of caves
is sheer space, is nothing, is without form:
if it should take form
and come to my hand,
I cannot speak, I cannot ask.

(Bhusnurmath and Menezes 1968, no. 53; my translation)

Sir,
when the earth had not spread and settled yet,
on water, tortoise, elephant, or snake,
when the sky was not yet,
when there was no sign of wind,
when fire had yet not flames,
when plant, hill, grass, and tree were not yet,
when the fourteen worlds spilling
over ages and aeons
were not established,
when the three lords of the worlds
who say they know the truth
were not yet,

in a stance that shows and shines forth
the unreachable lord of caves, the *liṅga*,
was there.

(Basavaraju 1960, no. 7; my translation)

Having known it once (if that's any kind of knowing as we know it), one wants to return to it, and can do so not by one's will but only through Guheśvara's:

Show me how
that walking without feet,
touching without hands,
tasting without a tongue,

show me how that Other, that Absolute,
that begs,
with all Feeling for a begging bowl,
and begs 'Give me now the Absolute',

show me that, O lord of caves

(Basavaraju 1960, no. 66; my translation)

If you can't do that, he sometimes says, show me at least others who have attained it—the one concession to tradition that Allama makes. And they use their senses differently from others.

Show me those who
with the eye for a beggar's staff,
hands for a begging bowl,
ears no other than the kindness of all the Ancients,
eating the alms only of the heart,
have evolved the body to its end,

show me those great ones,
O lord of caves

(Basavaraju 1960, no. 77; my translation)

Notice, how the whole body, and the senses earlier rejected for its empirical illusions, are re-dedicated, often made into a kind of metaphor, the sensorium moved towards its own evolution (*pariṇāma*), is now envisaged as a possibility: here the *aṅga*, or body, and *liṅga*, or the Absolute, have become one, as they always should have been, as the rhyming words (*aṅga, liṅga*) indicate. They are a primordial pair, a couple that had been uncoupled so far. Once this is reached we end with a kind of paradise, as in the next poem.

Everything seen is holy
everything heard is a lesson in the ultimate
everything is touched by the Wish-Fulfilling Stone
everyone in conversation is a free spirit

wherever one moves, the world is pure
wherever one steps on earth is a pilgrim place
all the waters one touches are streams of the holy
and anyone who surrenders to you in *bhakti* is freed at once

O lord of caves
there is no way to compare
the way you move

(Basavaraju 1960, no. 78; my translation)

This piece implicitly uses the same form, '*A*' but without the usual feature

f: the world which is full of negative qualities (*–f*) is now not so—'Everything usually is not holy, but now it is; hardly anyone converses with a free spirit, but now everyone does, etc.'

I said earlier that *nirguna* poets rather than *saguṇa* poets characteristically use this riddling language. Both kinds of religious poets are faced with self-contradictions. If the attitude is entirely *saguṇa*, the poetry is not religious; it has to include the *nirguṇa*, the transcendent, neither/nor, both/end aspect of divinity, that which both fills the world and stands 'ten fingers' beyond it. Without this tension, one can have poetry, but not religious poetry. The *saguṇa* saints, being religious poets, always celebrate the *saguṇa* but suggest *nirguṇa*, often explicitly, sometimes in the epithets; here is a poem by Nammāḻvār on language:

You are what they said
in the Good Old Books:
'Than this
there is nothing more subtle.'

You are that form
and that formlessness

everlasting
you wear lotus and basil
on your chest

and whenever we say
whatever we can
it becomes you

however we say it

Nammāḻvār 7.8.10; Ramanujan 1981, 42, 131–2[1]

The *nirguṇa* poets have the opposite problem—as religious persons they can celebrate all they want the lord without qualities, but as poets they have to have images, language, the world of *guṇas* or qualities, all of which the concept of *nirguṇa* denies and rejects. Thus they have, as poets, to use the very elements they reject as mystics. A prayer attributed to Śaṅkara sums up the dilemma:

O lord, forgive me my three human sins:

you are everywhere, yet I worship you here;
you are without form, yet I worship you
in these, and these other forms;
you need no praise, yet I offer you
this prayer.
Lord, forgive me my three sins.

(Ramanujan 1981, 136)

The rejection of all structures that allow ordinary cognition including language is explicit in Allama. We must remember, however, that the poems are placed by the tradition in a rough scheme of the religious man's or woman's ascent, usually in six steps (*śaṭsthala sopana*). Through these six stages the aspirant's attitudes change (Ramanujan 1973, 169–74). The body, the senses and the phenomenal world (as we have seen in previously cited examples) change their status in the eyes of the saint-poet. So what one gets is not a system of constants but an ascent or progression (or regression, if you wish) of viewpoints, perspectives towards the same objects experienced earlier at different stages—like the pattern of trees in Proust viewed by the narrator's moving eye. Here are two poems, brought together as 1 and 2 in the *Śūnyasampādane*, a thirteenth-century text that orders the *vacanas* in a fictitious narrative:

Like a spark in the stone,
a reflection in the water,
a tree in the seed,

silence in sound (*śabda*, also word)
O lord of caves
is the connection
between you and your men.

(Bhusnurmath and Menezes 1968, no. 1; my translation)

But look what happens to the metaphors in the next poem (S'.2). If you have naively accepted the above traditional images for god in the devotee, he jolts you by asking you how you could have accepted something like that:

What, can a spark in a stone
burn anything?
can a tree in a seed
rustle in the wind?
It does not show nor shine forth,
this stance of the lord of caves.
Only someone who has enjoyed It
knows It.

(Bhusnurmath and Menezes 1968, no. 2; my translation)

Both the metaphor and the questioning of the metaphor are part of the repertoire. They are part of a sequence of stages, though sometimes

they occur in the same poem, in a late stage, as in a poem that we cited earlier:

Looking for your light,
I went out:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,

a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

O lord of caves,
if you are light,
there can be no metaphor.

(Allama Prabhu 1972; Ramanujan 1973, 168)

He begins by attempting a metaphor ('the light of a million million suns')—and then cancels it, questioning even the act of metaphor-making. *Upamisu*, 'to metaphor', is one of his favorite verbs.

III

Before I close I wish to read a couple of poems in detail. I've been groping for a way of reading these poems as poems, not merely as riddles. What follows is such a groping for a way of reading such poems.

Poem 10 in the *Śūnyasampādane* gives us a metaphor where what is metaphored is not clear: it is a form of *samāsokti*, where we are given the vehicle but the tenor is obscure: dreams are a good example of *samāsoktis*. Metaphoric riddles, as we said earlier, begin as *samāsoktis*, except that the answers return them to ordinary metaphors (as dream interpretation does, too, though it may use the logic of other tropes like metonymy also). Such a restoration to unambiguous normalcy and culturally acceptable 'common sense' is characteristic of riddles (as a folk genre). But Allama's poems are not like that, though commentators treat them as ordinary riddles with glosses and answers.

Look, girls, look at the dog fight
when the world's body falls dead.

Look, girls, how they wrangle, the dogs
come to feast on the carcass of the world,

and as the dogs wrangle, look
　　how the carcass laughs at them!

For, don't you see, the *liṅga*
　　called the lord of caves

is just not there!

(Basavaraju 1960, no. 46; Bhusnurmath and
Menezes 1968, no. 10; my translation)

I couldn't find a commentary on this piece, but it is placed by L. Basavaraju, the editor, in *saṁsāraheyasthala*, i.e., the stage where worldly life is seen as despicable—hence the wrangle probably of relatives over the dead, and the dead suddenly turning around and having the last laugh. The glossary of esoteric or *bedagina* terms claims that the dog represents the senses, which makes us interpret the poem as saying: Look how the senses fight over the world's body, which is dead because the lord of caves isn't present there. This clearly opposes *saṁsāra* (worldly life) to the lord—very much the opposite of what a *saguṇa* poet like Nammāḻvār would say.

Poem 49 repeats the image and makes it explicitly a riddle, ending with the riddle-challenge, 'Tell me, lord of caves, what's this wonder?'

I saw the monkey
fondle the fallen elephant's carcass.
I saw the forest
a prostitute enticing customers
and taking their money.
In the deserted ghost-town
I saw a dog fight.

　　Now tell me, lord of caves,
　　what's this wonder?

(Basavaraju 1960, no. 49; my translation)

The commentary says, 'The monkey is the mind which is attached to the dead body of the ego (*ahaṁkāra*). In the forest of life, illusion or *māyā* is deluding people. In the village of the five elements (*pancabhūtadehagrāma*), the dogs, which are the senses, are busy creating conflicts.'

Now we find certain constants (both within and outside the poems) are getting established here: monkey = mind, dogs = senses, carcass = worldly life of the ego. Yet one cannot help feeling that this kind of conversion table—which exchanges poetry for allegory, turns image into meaning and the metaphoric into the literal—demystifies and 'finds the answer to the riddle' but leaves one feeling unhappy and cheated. The poem's work has been undone: the poet's alchemy has turned idea into poetic event and image, and the commentator has turned an experiential event into the common coin of a cultural commonplace. Why would the poet, who knows quite well all the abstract words, use these images to say the same things in roundabout ways? We know that Allama has hundreds of perfectly clear poems. Then why this *bedagu*, this fancy talk?

If we treat it as a poem, we see, first of all, three images of a deserted town (which is mentioned last, dramatically), as if after a war or a famine. Only a monkey, a prostitute, and some wayfarers and dogs are left behind. Still, they are plying their trade, indifferent to the (royal?) elephant's death, the absence of quarters for the prostitute, and inhabitants in a town. Worldly existence seems to be like that: we are these desperate practitioners of normal behaviour acting blindly even in abnormal circumstances—all seen and described from the outside, to the lord of caves, and to whom the ironic wondering question is addressed by the questing pilgrim-passerby.

This experiential reading doesn't quite cancel the commentary's abstractions, but gives it flesh and maybe even blood. The answer, I'd suggest, is not in the point-to-point identification of elements (dog = senses, etc.), though that may be by now part of the set of culturally given associations, but the way they add up to a wondering question or a questioning wonder, a description which once experienced is its own answer. Once experienced, the images become metaphors, if you wish, for an attitude, constitute a way of looking at things and wondering at them, without ever fully undoing the elements. This standing outside of things, this dialogue between two outsiders (the poet and the god who's beyond it all), which as listeners we overhear—it is the *adbhuta* or the wonderment, a mystery that doesn't exclude compassion or despair, about how people (and, by implication, we) could be like this. Such, I suggest, is one of the effects of the poem.

Or take this poem:

A new parrot was born in the sky
and made herself a gorgeous house.

One parrot became twenty five parrots,
Brahma became her cage,
Viṣṇu her bird-feed,
Rudra her perch.

And when she devoured
right in front of them
a baby

all that's seen and all that's heard
vanished: how come, O lord of caves?

The commentary says unambiguously: in the final stage of the soul's ego-state, life's parrot is born and settles in the world. It's made of twenty-five elements. Brahma stands for the gross body (Brahma = *rajas*), which is its dwelling; the subtle body (Viṣṇu = *sattva*), with its sensory elements, provides its food; Rudra (= *tamas*), the causal body or *karaṇa-tanu*, becomes its base. Because the three principles are devoured by the ego-state, it cannot see anything and cannot identify anything by name.

Again, let's attend to the wonder and drama of it: the parrot out of an empty sky, becoming twenty-five, with the three great gods enlisted one by one for her props, and suddenly the violence (O lord of caves, these poems are violent!) of cannibalizing one of her creations, one of her own chicks—at which point the world of perception and the naming language that accompanies it are gone. It's the drama of the evolving self.

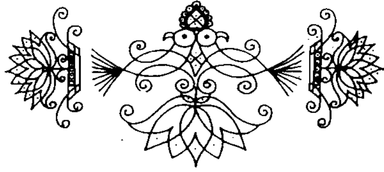
If we take the parrot as the original creative self that organises the world, including the gods themselves, for its own use, when that self begins to eat one of its own creations, the object world (which includes names) around it vanishes. It is completely self-enclosed. The *nirguṇa* poet's satiric use of the three great gods of the pantheon as mere convenient props should be noted. Here too the poet, unlike other *bhakti* poets, is not personally involved, nor is the god. They are spectators, and make us spectators of our selves—which we were not at the beginning of the poem. Not the abstractions which may be the scaffolding of the poem, but the irony, satire, teasing play, and the concrete power of a well-worked image, which we first enjoy as if it's a science-fiction parrot, finally are trained upon ourselves. That's part of the drama, the reversal, the *perpeteia* that is both in the poem and in us, the listeners. If we don't recognise this shift or 'transformation of consciousness,' as David Shulman would say, we would have converted the poem into a mere riddle with one given answer.

Even in a riddle, the experience of bafflement, the seeing of connections between the metaphor and the object, leaves its traces and appeals to our sense of wonder or *adbhuta* but, I'd submit, it returns us via the scenic route to where we were. An Allama poem moves you out of where you were. Not the restoration of cultural categories, but their displacement, the derangement of your normal states, is one of its functions—often achieved by its climax of violent images.

As we read enough of them, we acquire (with or without an explicit concordance) a repertoire of images with some sense of what they signify, of the family of special vocabularies they belong to (like *yoga* physiology), but we still have to read the poems, distinguishing them from their materials. For the poems play on materials as on an instrument, producing tones of irony, sequencing them towards a melodic drama which ultimately takes place within us. Derangement in a well-arranged world, mystification, the feeling of not knowing in people who know it all, is the effect of the *bedagu* poem.

The riddle, as a folk genre, plays with cultural categories too; but, with the answer, it returns you to the well-ordered world of commonplaces. A riddle without an answer is not complete. In an Allama poem, not being able to answer is the answer; not having a language is the language; the clarity is in the mystery. It's like a mathematical proof that proves that a problem cannot be answered, that certain theorems are incapable of proof.

Varieties of *Bhakti*



I shall begin this discussion of varieties of *bhakti* or devotional lyrics by citing four of them. The first is a *vacana* by Mahādevyyakkā, a woman saint of the twelfth century who composed in Kannada. The God-lover is Śiva, called here *cennamallikārjuna*, the Arjuna of the Jasmines.

I have Māyā for mother-in-law;
the world for father-in-law;
three brothers-in-law, like tigers;

and the husband's thoughts
are full of laughing women:
no god, this man.

And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.

But I will
give this working wench the slip
and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord.

My mind is my maid:
by her kindness, I join
my Lord,

my utterly beautiful Lord
from the mountain-peaks,
my Lord white as jasmime
and I will make Him
my good husband.

Mahādevyyakkā 328 (Ramanujan 1973, 141)

The second is a Vaiṣṇava lyric by Govindadāsa, a Bengali poet of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. The speaker is Rādhā, the poem is addressed to Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Rādhā is a married girl; like all the girls of the village, she is in love with Kṛṣṇa, the dark-bodied cowherd youth.

O Mādhava, how shall I tell you of my terror?
I could not describe my coming here
if I had a million tongues.
When I left my room and saw the darkness
I trembled:
I could not see the path,
there were snakes that writhed round my ankles!

I was alone, a woman; the night was so dark,
the forest so dense and gloomy,
and I had so far to go.
The rain was pouring down—
which path should I take?
My feet were muddy
and burning where thorns had scratched them.
But I had the hope of seeing you, none of it mattered,
and now my terror seems far away. . . .
When the sound of your flute reaches my ears
it compels me to leave my home, my friends,
it draws me into the dark toward you.

I no longer count the pain of coming here,
says Govinda-dasa.

(Dimock and Levertov 1967, 21)

The third poem is one of John Donne's Holy Sonnets, Sonnet XIV:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
Yet dearly 'I love you', and would be loved faine,
But am betroth'd unto your enemie:
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

(Grierson 1951, 299)

The fourth is George Herbert's *Love (III)*, the last poem of his book *The Temple*, first printed in 1633.

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.
A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat.
So I did seat and eat.
(Gardner 1980, 180)

In a sense, the two Indian poems are related to each other indirectly. They both belong to an ancient composite pan-Indian *bhakti* or devotional tradition, as the two English poems belong to the Metaphysical line, and to the larger European tradition of devotional poetry. They are similar in many ways. The most obvious and striking similarity is in the central image of profane love for sacred love. All four are what are called 'sacred parodies' or imitations of love-poetry.

Let us look at each of them separately first. Mahādevyyakkā's and especially Govindadāsa's poems explicity take over conventions of Indian love-poetry (in Sanskrit as in the regional languages). In the Mahādevyyakkā poem, the general idea of an *abhisārikā*, the woman stealing out of a houseful of relatives to meet her lover, is the central image. But, apart from the helpful maid, there are no other details. The method is the method of allegory, explicitly equating, one-for-one, various members of a household with various abstractions: Māyā or Primal Illusion is the mother-in-law, the world is the father-in-law. Some of the equations are implicit, and they draw on a common background of philosophic concepts. For instance, the three brothers-in-law are the three *guṇas*, the three ultimate components which make all the particulars of nature what they are; these three are inescapable as long as you are part of nature, they keep a tiger-vigil. The husband is *karma*, the past of the ego's many lives. The sister-in-law, who also keeps the speaker imprisoned, is apparently the *vāsanā*, the binding memory or 'smell' that the *karma*-past carries with it. The kind confidante or maid is the mind, who alone helps her meet her lord and keep the tryst.

Note how all the relationships mentioned are those by marriage. The house is full of in-laws, legal and social ties. Not one person is related to her by blood. (It is possible that the mother-in-law in a South Indian family of this region could be a blood-relation, a paternal aunt, as Prof. M.G. Krishnamurthi, of the University of Wisconsin, once suggested to me. This only adds a further nuance, the conversion by law of a blood-kin into an in-law). A net of legalities binds her. These are what you enter into, not what you are born with. This elaborate build-up of legal bonds is shattered by the cuckolding climax of the poem, with the lord as the adulterous lover. Here a vulgar Kannada word, tabooed in all respectable households, is used to speak of the 'cuckolding', the 'fornication'; the whole poem, written in a colloquial, vigorous speaking style, moves toward the word *hādara* or fornication, enacting by linguistic shock the shock of her explosive desire to shatter the entire framework of so-called legitimacies. Elsewhere also Mahādevyyakkā rejects outright all notions of modesty as a virtue. She is supposed to have thrown off her clothes at one point, in defiance of the indecent pruderies of the society around her.

This points up the view that love of god is not only an unconditional giving up of all you have, but it is necessarily an illegitimate relationship, illegitimate from the point of view of law and social order; it is an act of violation against ordinary expected loyalties, a breakdown of the predictable and the secure. Some such notion is at the heart of this complex of metaphoric action. The lord is the illicit lover; he will break up the world of *karma* and normal relationships, the husband's family that must necessarily be violated and trespassed against, if one should have anything to do with god.

The Donne poem is close to the Kannada poem in conception and in the vigour of its speech-rhythms. It opens with an imperative verb 'batter', evoking the violence of a battering-ram in a siege, with strong sexual overtones. Both aspects—the military and the sexual—are worked out in the poem. The speaker is 'like an usurpt towne', to 'another due'; like Mahādevī he says,

Yet dearely 'I love you', and would be loved faine,
But am betroth'd unto your enemie:
Divorce mee, untie, or break that knot againe,

and presents a paradox that sums up Mahādevyyakkā's position also: 'Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.' But the poems are very different in effect, not only because of the technical differences in language and form, but because the Mahādevyyakkā poem is the expression of defiance and confidence, the Donne poem one of anguish and diffidence. In the first, the lord is a third person, the woman is the initiator speaking in the first person; in the Christian poem, the poem is addressed to the lord, inviting him to 'burn and make new', for man's own labour to admit the lord is 'to no end'. Furthermore, the devotee rightfully belongs to the lord, as an 'usurpt towne'. But there are also detailed resemblances in the contrast—like Reason, the Viceroy of God, and Mahādevyyakkā's mind, who is her helpmeet. There are other poems by Mahādevī where she takes Donne's position: that the lord is the legitimate husband, and the world she is living with is the immoral paramour. Note also how in the Indian poem, the whole world of relationships is the 'enemie'; in Donne's there is a specific satanic enemy. The unthinkability of divorce for the Indian woman-saint makes the adultery even more daring.

In the Bengali poem, the love-convention is full-blown: the trysting woman, her terror of the night, the thorny path that cannot be seen, and the rains which are the conventional setting for a lovers' union. Here also Rādhā is a married woman leaving home and friends; she says in another poem, 'In this family, in that house, who is really mine?' (Dimock and Levertov 1967, 177).

Anyone comparing the poem superficially with the famous poem by St. John of the Cross will see strong similarities:

Upon a gloomy night,
With all my cares to loving ardours flushed,
(O venture of delight!)
With nobody in sight
I went abroad when all my house was hushed.
(Campbell 1960)

But the night through which St. John goes is the Dark Night of the soul; the night of Rādhā is the night of Indian love-conventions. There is another important difference: Rādhā's words are addressed to Kṛṣṇa himself, St. John's to a third person. There is no way of telling that the Rādhā poem is a religious poem, except by the name Mādhava and prior knowledge or later commentary about the religious implications. In this full immersion in the love-image, the poem is somewhat like the Song of Songs in the Bible.

On the other hand, to a Bengali Vaiṣṇava, Rādhā is the human spirit

and Kṛṣṇa the loving lord. Their adulterous relationship implicates and symbolises a whole theology. In certain esoteric tantric Vaiṣṇava cults, they make a distinction between *svakīya* or 'one's own' and *parakīya* 'another's'. To unite with another's woman is more poignant, more daring in the search for a state beyond social good and evil; another's woman, unlike one's own wife, is inaccessible and in being so gives the devotee a hint of the inaccessibility of the lord himself. So a union with her symbolises the essential paradox of religious experience, union with the inaccessible. Another aspect of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa doctrine is that all human souls are feminine and the lord is the divine spouse. Here again, it is the woman who goes in search of the lord, as in the Kannada and the Spanish poems.

Herbert's poem does not mention God, but only Love, with a capital L. Though the speaker originally comes to Love, Love does the rest, dispels his sense of guilt and sin, assures him. Nowhere is it made clear whether Love is masculine or feminine. This ambiguity is achieved by using the word Love itself every time, without any resort to pronouns; for the English pronoun would have obliged the writer to choose between masculine and feminine. Furthermore, the ambiguity between human and divine, between lover and creator, is reinforced by that marvellous pun:

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Like the Bengali poem, Herbert's deliberately reworks an Elizabethan love convention, the dialogue of lovers. In Bengali, *śṛngāra*, the Erotic *rasa* (one of the nine prescribed *rasas* or aesthetic-emotions, each with its own conventions), is enlisted for *bhakti*; later *bhakti* itself came to be considered a *rasa* or aesthetic emotion. Parallel to this Indian development, in Herbert's time there developed a genre called sacred parody. Herbert wrote another poem explicitly announced as 'A Parodie', which reworks a love-song attributed to Donne into a song addressed to his divine lover.

But the poem's background is in the *Imitation of Christ*: 'I am not worthye to looke towarde thee. Thou commest to me, thou will be with me, thou biddest me to thy feast, thou will geve me this heavenly meate . . .' (book 4, chapter 2). As Louis L. Martz says, 'It is through the mediation of this presence that 'Love' achieves its subtle intimacy of love, its restrained power of allusion, in a sacred parody which simultaneously represents the reception of the sacrament and the admission of

the redeemed to the 'marriage supper' of Revelation (Martz 1962, 319). Placed as the consummating final poem of his work *The Temple*, it marks the achievement of 'a world where every beloved image has bodily form and every bodily form is loved', as Yeats would say.

There are a number of other interesting considerations for which we have no space here. For instance, the familiar language of all these poems: in the Kannada *bhakti* poem, and to some extent even in the Bengali, the simplicity and vigour of a colloquial dialect represents a revolt against Sanskrit, a defiance of the 'language of the gods' and of the ritual and brahmanical learning it represented. Kabir, the fifteenth century Hindi *bhakti*-poet, said, 'Sanskrit is as the water of a well, but the vernacular (*bhāṣā*) like a running brook'. *Bhakti* was a return to the language of daily speech and to the unmediated vision. Herbert's simplicity was a correlate of his Christian simplicity; he, like Hopkins, had conflicts about the practice of poetry itself as somehow incompatible with the practice of the presence of God. He resorts to 'sacred parody', partly because he wished to press the very poetry of love (which he thought trivial and precious) to the praise of God. With him, direct simplicity of speech is a cause as well as an effect of the 'interior simplicity' of the Christian life.

This kind of conflict between poetry and religion does not seem to be present in Indian poetry. The presence or absence of such conflict might imply different views of poetry in the culture. For one thing, the *bhakti* poems were mostly written by people who wrote nothing else, unlike the English poems. Their simplicity was not a willed simplicity in the Kannada case (the later Bengali lyrics *were* mannered). The *bhakti* poets are saints first, often with no self-consciousness about their exquisite and passionate poetry.

The difference also lies in the fact that the Kannada *bhakti* poems, like many hundreds of them in the languages of India, were probably oral compositions—probably even by illiterate saints. Their directness in passion and expression, though not guaranteed by this fact, was certainly helped by it. There is nothing like Donne's 'hydroptique' and immoderate desire for all kinds of learning, nor Herbert's virtuosity, in most of the *bhakti* poems—though, probably, the Bengali ones were Herbert-like in their sophistication.

It is customary in discussions of religious poetry to marvel at the similarities of source, theme, symbol, even of particualr phrases. The question of why such similarities should exist across wide differences of space, language and culture need not occupy us here. Some will argue for

influence, others for the universality of human experience, still others for primordial archetypes or a perennial philosophy.

However, here we have tried to suggest briefly that deeply different underlying contexts and aesthetic preoccupations can cast up similar-looking surface structures and even styles. Poems are unique and incomparable as poems. Only abstraction and restatement renders them comparable. A major goal of comparison is contrast. Texts from different traditions, when juxtaposed, may help define each other's uniqueness. We need not add that 'comparative literature' is probably only a tactful name for 'contrastive literature'.

On Bharati and His Prose Poems



Some poets are significant in their tradition because they render their past usable. In their individual works, they recapitulate various phases and forms of their cultural past—as a human foetus recapitulates in its few months in the womb the earlier stages of life from one-celled organism to worm, fish, frog and primate. Subramania Bharati (1882–1921) was one such poet for Tamil. To respond to his work is to respond to a great deal of Tamil, Indian and Western Literature.

In his work, one finds poems written in the manner of various devotional poets (Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Śākta) as well as the later Cittars (Sanskrit *siddha*) who were fierce iconoclastic mystics. In his *Putiya Atticcuti*, Bharati writes in the manner of Avvai's ancient alphabetic aphorisms (somewhat like *A for Apple, B for Bell*) and makes them sound like Blake's fierce sayings in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* Here are a few examples:

Stand tall like a mountain.
Snarl at those who snarl.
Despise Astrology.
Praise the Sun.
Do not frown.
Worship no corpses.
Kill foolishness.
Cultivate energy (*rajasam*).
Exercise anger.
Eat and enjoy what comes.
Learn astronomy.
Explode in speech.
Make the Vedas new (245–9).

Some of Bharati's best known freedom songs are in folk forms like lullabies (*papappattu*) and drum songs (*muracu*). From the Sanskrit tradition, he uses the hymnal (*stotra*) forms, and most tellingly the central incident of Draupadi's disrobing and her vow—which becomes in his hands an allegory of woman oppressed and a contemporary image of India under foreign rule, without ever ceasing to be the *Mahābhārata*. From English, he assimilates Keats and Shelley, more Shelley than Keats: in his youth, he declaimed Shelley on the banks of the Ganges, and he took the pen-name 'Shelley-*dāsan*', or 'Shelley's minion', for his early writings. He knew Hugo in French; wrote admiringly about the economy of Japanese haikus; adapted the '*Vande mātaram*' as well as the French national anthem; wrote poems in praise of the *caṅkam* scholar U.V. Cāmināta Aiyar as well as the Italian patriot Mazzini; denounced the Czar of Russia no less than the oppression of sugarcane workers in Fiji. Few Tamil poets have had as wide a poetic education as Bharati did: beginning with traditional Tamil forms (in which he versified at ten), it soon included Sanskrit, English and Hindi (in Banaras), and French (in Pondicherry).

I have argued elsewhere that no significant Indian writing after the Vedas (*c.* 1500 BC, in Sanskrit) and *caṅkam* texts (ca. first to third centuries, in Tamil) has been the product of a single linguistic tradition. Even the Vedas are known to have Dravidian and tribal words; even *caṅkam* Tamil has some Sanskrit and Prakrit words. In his nature poems on seasonal cycles, Kalidasa, the greatest of Sanskrit classical poets, seems to owe much to local *baramasi* poems, dialectal folk-poems about the twelve months of the year; he was aware of the flora and fauna of the many regions of his India. Kampan, the Tamil epic poet, draws freely from classical Tamil, the Vaiṣṇava saints, and Tamil folklore, as well as from Sanskrit epics. The earliest Tamil devotional movements grafted Tamil conceptions of women and kings, the worship of objects and places, onto Sanskritic concepts and myths.

After the nineteenth century, no significant Indian writer lacks any of the three traditions: the regional mother-tongue, the pan-Indian (Sanskritic, and in the case of Urdu and Kashmiri, the Perso-Arabic as well), and the western (mostly English). Thus, Indian modernity is a response not only to contemporary events but to at least three pasts. Poetic, not necessarily scholarly, assimilation of all these three resources in various individual ways seems indispensable. Neither Tagore in Bengali, nor Vallathol in Malayalam, neither Bendre in Kannada nor Bharati in Tamil (all of them similarly patterned, in their many-sided literary self-images,

probably through the Tagore example), and among a younger generation neither Buddhadeva Bose in Bengali nor Adiga in Kannada, would be what they are without a strong presence of all three. The malaise and feebleness of some modern Indian poetry (in English as well as in our mother-tongues) is traceable, I believe, to the weak presence or total disconnection with one or another of these three resources. The strong presence of the three is certainly not sufficient, but it is necessary. When they meet in a poet of genius, the poetry is dynamic, changing from phase to phase; the tensions among the three produce not only some of our best poetry, but change the history of prose and poetry in the poet's native tongue, as Bharati's did. The dialectic creates new problems and new solutions—like Bharati's prose poems.

Bharati, at his best, renews the traditions he uses. Make the Vedas new, he had said once. There are always shocks, surprises. Look at how Bharati condenses and renews old conceptions of fire (one of his obsessions):

I found a young spark of fire
    I left it in a hole in the woods.
The woods burned down till all was still.
    For the valour of fire,
how can one speak of young or old?
Tattirikita Tattirikita Tittom (280)

Or watch what happens in this lilting soft-seeming familiar-sounding devotional poem on Kṛṣṇa:

In the black feather of the crow,
    Nanda Lala, one sees
the dark colour of your skin,
    Nanda Lala.
Whatever trees one sees,
    Nanda Lala, one sees
the green of your body,
    Nanda Lala.
In all the sounds one hears,
    Nanda Lala, one hears
the sound of your music,
    Nanda Lala.
And when one puts a finger in a flame,
    Nanda Lala, one feels
the thrill of your touch,
    Nanda Lala. (172)

The last stanza gives one a shock, to me almost Baudelairean, in its perception of a god in one's pain, its perception that pain and self-torture increase the thrill and pitch of reality. Not that such notions have to come from Baudelaire; they are at hand in the intricate annals of Hindu or Jain mysticism.

While Bharati poured out new poems and songs in various older forms, in his last few years he attempted the most daring and original of his renewals—his prose poems (*vacana kavitai*) on Vedic themes. Originality is often a return to origins. Bharati's themes in these poems are elemental: a series of seven on Joy, thirteen on the Sun, eight on Śakti (Energy), fifteen on the Wind, two on the Sea. (We shall not consider the two short poetic plays, also usually included under his prose poems). In these remarkable colloquial hymns, narrative, prayer, description, fantasy, ironic asides, and sudden political lashings at his countrymen's lethargy, alternate with modern science and sudden epiphanies. In them all his powers and many backgrounds come to a sharp focus. Here are some translations.

Wind 4

Desert,
Sand, sand, sand, for miles and miles the level sands in all four directions.

Evening.
A caravan of merchants on camels moves through the desert.
The wind arrives, the rogue, the villain.
The sands of the desert whirl in the sky.
An instant of death's agony. The entire caravan perishes in the sand.

The wind is cruel. He is Rudra, the Howler. His sounds terrify.
His acts are savage.
We praise him.

Wind 5

The old myths say Bhima and Hanuman are the sons of the wind.
The Veda says, all breathing things are children of the wind.
The breath is wind.
Breath is substance, the wind is its action.
Mother Earth is alive.
The air on the earth is of her breathing.
The wind is the breath of life. He is one who destroys life.
The wind is the breath of life. Therefore, lives do not die.
The little breath joins the great breath.
There is no death.

The entire universe is the dwelling place of breath.
Coming into being, growing, changing, vanishing—all these are the wind's doing.
We praise the wind.

Wind 7

Look at the tiny ant,
How tiny!
In it are hands, legs, mouth, belly, all the organs of life kept in place.
Who put them there? The great Goddess Śakti.
All the parts work and fit precisely.
The ant eats, sleeps, mates, gives birth, runs, seeks, makes war, defends territory.
The source of all this is the wind.
The great goddess plays the game of life and the wind is her instrument.
We sing the wind.
It stands as courage in the act of knowing;
becomes love and hate in the heart;
is the breath in the breath of life.
In the world without, we know its actions, yet we know it not.
Bless this god of winds.

Wind 8

The season of rains.
Evening.
Cold wind blows.
The sick man covers his body,
to no purpose.
You cannot fear the wind and live happily in the world.
Your breath is wind. How can you live scared of your breath?
May the wind blow on us.
May it guard us from sicknesses.
The mountain breeze is good.
The winds of the sky are good.
Men make the air of the city their enemy.
They do not worship the wind god.
So the wind god rages and wipes them out.
Let's bow to the wind god.
There should be no mud in his path, no evil smells,
no glitter of rotting things, no dust. There should be nothing unclean.
Here comes the wind.
Let us wipe clean his pathways, let us sprinkle water on them.
Let us make groves and flowering arbours in his pathways.

Let us burn camphor and such fragrant things in his pathways
May he come as a healer.
May he come as our breath of life.
As elixir, ambrosia.
We worship the wind.
He is the son of Śakti, darling of the queen.
We shout our welcome.
Bless him.

Wind 9

Wind, come softly.
Don't break the shutters of the windows.
Don't scatter the papers.
Don't throw down the books on the shelf.
Look, now, what you did! There, you threw them down.
You tore the pages of the books.
Brought rain again.
You're very clever at poking fun at weaklings.
Delicate crumbling houses, crumbling doors, crumbling rafters,
crumbling wood, crumbling bodies, crumbling lives, crumbling hearts
the wind god winnows and crushes them all.
He'll not do what you tell him.
Therefore, men, come
let us build strong homes,
joint the doors firmly.
Practise to firm the body.
Make the heart steadfast.
Do this, and the wind will be friends with us.

The wind blows out weak fires.
He makes strong fires roar and flourish
His friendship is good.
We praise him every day.

Wind 10

The rain pours.
The whole town is wet.
The Tamil people stand like water buffaloes, in wet forever,
sit on the wet, walk on the wet, sleep on the wet, they cook on the wet, they eat on the wet.
You cannot find a dry Tamilian even for a medical specimen.
The cold wind blows ceaselessly.
Some of the Tamilians are down with a fever.

Every day some die, the surviving idiots say, 'That's fate!'
Yes, fool, nothing but fate.
'No happiness for the fool' says one of god's laws.
In a land without science, diseases multiply: that's the rule.
There are no sciences in Tamil country.
Instead of raising true sciences,
they are forgetting even the ones that were there,
the brahmans of Tamil country,
they tell lying tales
to fools and fill their bellies.
You think the cold wind is poison?
It is ambrosia;
if you live in dry houses and wear proper clothes,
Wind is good.
We worship him.

Wind 12

The crow flies,
It swims on waves of air.
What is it that's like the waves and what affords the flight of the crow? The Air.
No, that is not the Wind.
That is the locus of the wind, the sphere of the wind.
When the wind blows,
invisible to the eye, subtle particles
of the element bombard us.
It's the custom of the world to call those particles the wind.
They are not the Wind, they are the chariots he rides.

If heat touches ice, it changes into water.
If one heats water, it changes into 'air'.
If one heats gold, it melts into liquid. If one heats that liquid, it becomes the 'air'.
Thus one may bring all objects of the world into a state of 'air'.
This 'air' is a dust of elemental particles.
We call the power that comes riding them
the Wind God, and bow to him.

The path of the crow's flight is not the wind
What makes that path is the wind.
It is he who propels the crow in its path.
We bow to him.
We salute him with the breath of our lives.

I shall end this paper by reading the extraordinary opening of this series, with a few comments:

Wind 1

A canopy on the verandah of a house. A canopy of fronds, coconut fronds
Seven or eight zigzag bamboo sticks
tied together with ordinary rope,
and coconut fronds spread over it.
On one of the bamboos hangs a piece of extra rope.
A piece of rope, a span in length.
One day it was happily swinging.
It seemed to have not a worry in the world.
It would stay still without a movement sometimes.
Even if you called, it wouldn't answer.
It wasn't like that today. 'Jolly' was the word.
This piece of rope and I were friends.
We would talk to each other now and then.
'If you talk to a piece of rope, will it answer?' you may ask.
Talk to a rope and see for yourself whether you get an answer.
But talk to it when it is happy.
If not, it will turn its face and say not a word, like women.
Whatever that be, the rope in this house will talk.
There is no doubt about it.
Did I say, one piece of rope? No, there were two.
One was a span long, the other was three fourths of a span.
One was male; the other, female; husband and wife.
The two of them
were exchanging amorous looks,
smiling a lot at each other,
engaging in banter,
quite absorbed in each other.
I happened to arrive there just then.
The he-rope was called Kandan.
The she-rope was called Valliyammai.
Just as you name people,
you can name ropes, too.
Kandan tries to put his hand on Valli's shoulder.
Valli sidesteps him.
That's when I arrived.

'Kandan, how's everything, okay?
I seem to have come at the wrong time
Shall I come some other time?' I asked

Kandan said, 'What's the matter with you?
You're such a Vedic type, such a puritan.
We're not shy in your company, are we, Valli?
Are you upset that this Ayyar
saw us carrying on?'
'Don't ask me such things,'
said Valli.
Kandan laughed aloud,
jumped up and down, clapping his hands,
and hugged Valli suddenly.
Valli screeched and struggled.
But in her heart Valli was delighted.
Aren't we happy when others watch our happiness?
It gives us satisfaction to watch their antics.
What's wrong with telling you what's true?
Young lovers' billing and cooing
is a pleasure to the eye, isn't it?
When Valli gets too noisy in her protest,
Kandan lets go.
A few minutes later, he goes back and hugs her.
Screeches again, then letting go;
hugging again; screeches again.
And so it goes.

'What, Kandan, you haven't said a word
to me, your visitor?
Shall I come another time?' I said.
'What's the matter with you? You Vedic types.
Just watch the fun, as you're doing,
a bit longer.
I've to settle some things with this woman.
Then I'd like to talk some things over with you.
Don't go yet, stay,' it said,
So I stood there and watched them.
After a little while, in the ecstacy of loving
even the female forgot that I was standing there,
lost her shyness. She began to sing.
Short lilting songs.
A different tune for each line. And just two variations.
Then another song.
As soon as Kandan finished, Valli began her song.
One after another, they sang. A happy pandemonium.
They didn't even touch each other for a while as they sang.
Then Valli would touch him and tease Kandan.

He would go towards her and try to hold her.
She would run. Pandemonium again.
This went on for a long time,
and Valli was getting really high.
I was thirsty and went next door
to get a drink of water.
When I came back, Valli was fast asleep.
Kandan was waiting for me.
As soon as he saw me, he said,
'Where did you go, Vedic?
You slipped away without telling me?'
'Soft, the lady is fast asleep,' I said.
Just then—how can I describe
the glory of the god who burst out of that rope
and stood before me?
The wind god.
I had imagined he would be big in body.
He was a diamond needle, a body of light.

'Namaste Vayo, tvameva pratyaksam Brahmasi.'

I salute you, wind. You are God made visible to human eyes.

When he appeared, the whole sky
was filled with life-force, and flames flew about.
I bowed to him a thousand times, with cupped hands.
The Wind God said:
'Son, what was your question?
You ask if that little piece of rope is asleep?
No, it is dead.
I am the life-force.
Bodies that connect with me live and move.
What does not, is a corpse. I am the breath of life.
Because of me, that little piece of rope breathed, lived, found joy.
When it grew tired, I let it sleep, die.
Sleep too is death, and death is only sleep.
I'll come back in the evening and blow life into it.
It will live again. I'll open its eyes. Make it move.
I'm the son of Energy, the great goddess.
Worship me and live.'

Namaste vayo, tvameva pratyaksam brahmasi
tvameva pratyaksam brahma vatisyami.

Observe how, in this poem, Bharati alternates between the so-called natural and the supernatural: and within the natural, between the human,

the animate, and the inanimate, and within the supernatural, between the Vedic god and a modern *elan vital*, joined in the words *prāṇa* (life breath) and *śakti* (energy). In the verse of the original which this rough translation tries to mimic, the lines move in varied rhythms—verse (for verse, it is) acquires the virtues of prose, and prose modulates into verse—paralleled and criss-crossed by the alternations between fancy and everyday realism, between rope and human, between rope and god. It opens with a colloquial description of a canopy (*paṇḍāl*) outside a house, and ends with a sonorous Vedic saying. Between these are many movements of conversation, whimsy, humorous self-reference, and the sudden epiphany that stills them all, till nothing but the finality of the Sanskrit lines will serve to end it. In the middle of it all is the poet, slightly ridiculous, embarrassed and out of place, a voyeur of the sexual scene that is the world; crazy enough and wise enough to talk to pieces of rope, and having them reply though not always politely; and finally, (as in many modern poems, e.g., Tiresias in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*) the voyeur turns seer, seeing both the Wind God's forms and his very essence. If we remember that the seemingly random names he gives the ropes, Kandan and Valli, are fraught with the mythology of Lord Murugan—one gets a depth within depth. Even the manifest gods and their consorts (Murugan and Valli) live and die as the *elan vital*, the *prāṇaśakti*, fills them and withdraws from them. What the voyeur is watching is not the sexuality of pieces of rope, and of human couples, but of a god and his beloved as well—all enclosed in the most common Tamil idiom, the prose rhythms of everyday consciousness. The texture of the piece is also a texture of meanings; its metre is truly 'a motion of meaning'—as it never was in Bharati's earlier, very successful, verse, whether devotional or patriotic. There is here a new kind of music, the music of speech in action, of a changing organic rhythm, not the music of formal verses nor the melody of song, for which Bharati's poetry is famous. Bharati wrote these probably in 1916, though they were published in 1930, after his death, and recognised decades later. He said about them, 'Poetry will no longer be written to be sung.' In these pieces, the *Ṛgveda* and the free wave-like movements and present tenses of Whitman become one. It is also Bharati's own *Ode to the West Wind*, though he has come far from Shelley's 'I fall on the thorns of life, I bleed.' To all these, Bharati adds his humour, his characteristic oscillations among divine, human and non-human. For instance, note the little touch where the rope twits him for being a Vaidika, a dry Vedic puritan who's embarrassed by sex. That is sly because the form of these poems are themselves partly Vedic, as the ending

shows—not to mention the further twist that the original Vedas, unlike the orthodox Vaidikas, were hardly squeamish about sex, as this poem too is not.

Furthermore, Bharati here uses contemporary Tamil to reach back into the past of the Vedas and forward into a future in modern Tamil poetry—he draws the bow back only to launch the arrow forward. In 1982, in the centenary year of his birth, a group of the younger Tamil poets edited and published a volume of these prose poems as their slim quiet tribute, amidst the noisier nationwide celebrations of this extraordinary and prophetic poet who lived and died a poor man.

IV
Essays on Folklore

Introduction by Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes



It is fitting that Ramanujan's essays on folklore conclude this volume because folklore was his mother tongue, the most natal of the languages he spoke, underlying his Kannada and Tamil, prior to the Sanskrit he learned, and informing the linguistics and other scholarly dialects he spoke so eloquently. Ramanujan's first published work, in 1955, discussed Kannada proverbs; one of his first articles in English, in 1956, reported a Kannada folktale he had collected from his own mother about a 'Clay Mother-in-Law'.

Ramanujan began to collect Kannada folklore in his twenties, but (as he later said) he had no idea that what he was doing was 'folklore' until he met Professor Edwin Kirkland of the University of Florida when the latter was in India in 1956, presumably working on *A Bibliography of South Asian Folklore*, which was published in 1966. It was no doubt through Kirkland's influence that Raman's first articles in English were submitted to and published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, which was then edited at the University of Florida. It may well have been Kirkland, too, who encouraged Raman to enroll at Indiana University to study linguistics and folklore. At Indiana Raman was exposed to folkloristics, in particular a folktale seminar conducted by Professor Warren Roberts, who had inherited the folktale mantle from his mentor, the then retired Professor Stith Thompson. At that seminar, he met fellow graduate student Alan Dundes, with whom he shared a life-long friendship and love of folklore.

Even in his first folklore essays in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, written well before his graduate work at Indiana, Raman raised important questions about the extent to which Indic folktales did or did not fit into European folkloristic typological categories. It is sad to read his remark,

in those essays, that he was unable to trace particular motifs because, at that time in the 1950s in India, he had 'no access to the full *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.' Later, he would return to those very same folktales after a lifetime of sophisticated theoretical thought.

Throughout the first half of his scholarly life (at the University of Chicago), Raman published relatively little on folklore. Instead he wrote and translated and lectured on classical Tamil poetry, linguistics, and *bhakti* poetry, that is, on the topics represented in the earlier sections of this book. Toward the middle of the 1970s, Raman returned to folklore as his primary focus, persuading the Joint Committee on South Asia of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council that folk materials were a rich but neglected source of indigenous models and metaphors. By that time anthropologists of India had also begun to study oral and folk traditions as part of a widespread trend in the humanities, away from Western abstractions and toward native concepts and categories. Although Ramanujan contributed much to this new interest in Indian folklore, he did not create as much as orchestrate it and widen the circles in which it was discussed. With his special gift of speaking across disciplines and across regional specialisations, he positioned folklore at the centre of scholarship on India.

Folklore had never been ignored in the study of South Asia—eminent Indologists such as Brown, Bloomfield, and Emeneau wrote about folk literature—but Ramanujan was one of the first modern scholars of India who looked at folklore as a field of inquiry in its own right, not as derivative or grist for another mill. Most important, he brought to his analyses an unparalleled combination of precision and personal passion; he was, as he liked to say, both a student and a specimen of Indian folklore. His legacy will be that he demonstrated what others had only been able to state—that the study of South Asia is inseparable from the study of its folklore.

One of Ramanujan's far-reaching contributions to the study of Indian folklore was to reconceptualise the debate about 'Great and Little Traditions.' This concept, as originally developed by Robert Redfield and applied to India by Milton Singer in the 1950s and 1960s, suggested that a great civilisation, such as India, evolved from local folk roots in the process of urbanisation. Over time, however, largely because of the ill-chosen labels 'great' and 'little', the concept became synonymous with division, hierarchy, and a bias in favor of written, brahmanical, Sanskrit traditions: in response, many anthropologists of India began to explore the 'little' traditions. But Ramanujan moved beyond the dichotomy altogether and

developed a theory of Indian civilization as 'context-sensitive', pluralistic, and reflexive (see 'Where Mirrors Are Windows' in Section I above). In his vision, folklore is one of several systems, several languages or registers, that people use depending on the particulars of context and audience. These systems—Sanskrit, classical literature, *bhakti*, folklore—comment on each other, and cannot be understood independently of each other. Ramanujan, the student-specimen, also insisted that it was not so much the civilisation as the individuals who carry within themselves these overlapping expressive codes. Not folklore as a precious preserve, safe from pernicious modern influences, not folklore as a culture of the little people, Raman's folklore was a full-fledged collaborator in the production of cultural meaning.

As a folklorist, Ramanujan combined his miniaturist approach and his love of literature in a life-long study of the folktale; proverbs, customs, and rituals interested him, but never so much as stories. Tales put culture in motion for him, stimulating his imagination, drawing his eye to detail, to structure, and enabling him to make his most trenchant observations of Indian culture. But Ramanujan was not a grand theorist and preferred instead to work inductively, cautiously, from instances to principles. Like *bhakti*, folktales present a counter-system, in which classical theories such as *karma* have limited currency and in which the chaste women of epic and classical drama play more complex and active roles. 'Genres are genders', he said, and the women-centred tales about which he wrote represent a major focus in the later years of his life. Women's tales were themselves context-sensitive, told from a woman's perspective, commenting on a woman's place in Hindu India. Here Ramanujan again stepped across boundaries, those that separate the world of men and women, and spoke in a mother tongue.

But even counter-systems are not autonomous, not entirely independent of the other systems to which they respond, and so folklore overlaps, perhaps at the deepest levels, with other expressive systems in India. Ramanujan thus found continuities, as well as alternatives, between folklore and classical traditions. Folk genres, he suggested, divide into the 'domestic' (*akam*) and the 'public' (*puṟam*), just like classical Tamil (*caṅkam*) poetry. Riddles are domestic, proverbs are public, and household tales evolve into publicly performed epics, settings where their anonymous characters receive names and histories.

Raman made another long-lasting contribution to re-establishing Indian folktales in international scholarship. As a folklorist, he knew that the alternatives and continuities that he explored in Indian folklore might

apply as well between tales told in India and those told around the world. In his Introduction to *Folktales of India* (1991), Raman demonstrated his mastery of the earlier voluminous scholarship devoted to the folktale in India. Although the nineteenth-century collections were typically made by missionaries or by wives of British government officials, and were subject to the vagaries of censorship and revision, the texts were still of some value.

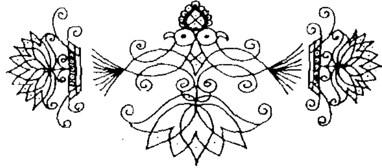
There is even a marked contrast between Raman's first reportings of folktales and his later, subtle, and brilliant analyses of them in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus in his initial account of 'Hanchi' in 1956, he was concerned to fit his Indian data into Aarne-Thompson tale-type categories, that is, to find appropriate tale-type or motif numbers for his Kannada text. His 1982 essay on the same tale, however, is informed by his knowledge of Proppian folktale morphology and modern psychology, both Freudian and Jungian. Here his emphasis is not whether an Indian tale fits into European categories, but whether certain distinctive oicotypical features of the Kannada tale bring into prominence specific characteristics of Indian (e.g., Kannada) culture.

This shift in perspective is an important feature of Raman's contribution to international folkloristics. Instead of attempting to conform to ethnocentric etic classificatory systems proposed outside of India, Raman understood the difficult task of showing how those systems failed to apply adequately to Indian data. Nowhere is this principle better exemplified than in his now classic study of the Indian Oedipus. In this paper, first published in 1971 but revised in 1983, Raman begins by describing his unsuccessful attempt to find Indic parallels to the tale-type of Oedipus (Aarne-Thompson tale-type 931). Only when he realised that the 'same' plot existed in India but was told from the mother's (instead of the son's) point of view was he able to find those parallels. This imaginative rethinking of the very notion of the tale-type (which can vary according to the different perspectives of different protagonists in the tale) has enormous implications for the study of folktales everywhere, not just in India. Raman's own eclecticism, which led him to utilise both structuralism and psychology to illuminate folktales, made him appreciate the late Bengt Holbek's *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (1987), inasmuch as Holbek drew on a similar combination of approaches for his analyses of nineteenth-century Danish tales.

In all of his essays, Raman never forgot his dual role, his dual academic citizenship. On the one hand, he wanted to bring the best of Western theorising to bear on Indian folktales, and he surely did this. On the other hand, he wanted to bring the best of Indian storytelling to the attention of international folklorists, who since the passing of the theory of Indianist origins, as championed by Benfey and Cosquin, had tended to neglect Indic materials. And he surely did this as well. In the end, he did more than simply serve as a two-way translator because, in the process, he proposed innovations in the very Western theories he originally hoped to apply to Indic material. His notions of tale-type perspective and counter-systems are likely to inspire future generations of folktale specialists.

Finally, perhaps under the partial spell of metalinguistics, or language about language, he taught us to let oral stories speak for themselves; they have their own tales to tell, as he put it. In several essays, he includes a section entitled 'Stories about Stories', a form of meta-folklore in which examples of a genre comment on the genre itself. The tales, he was telling us, are not mere repositories of cultural content but aesthetic forms that enact their meaning in speech. Ramanujan's folklore scholarship is a series of 'stories about stories'. His intelligence lit up the tales he told, like a lamp moving across a dark space, illuminating this corner, pointing to that detail, a contrast with a Sanskrit story or a parallel with Shakespeare, but never reducing the whole to a grand premise or single conclusion, always giving back complexity, deferring to the voice of the tale, and letting us listen.

The Clay Mother-in-law: A South Indian Folktale



I first heard the following tale from my mother, who had heard it from *her* mother in Trichinopoly; it had been narrated to my grandmother by an aunt of hers, who hailed from the same district. I made brief notes of it in Tamil, and later wrote it out in English. I do not think that it has been collected ever before.

There are many stories where mothers-in-law figure prominently; they are usually told by women as bed-time stories to children. Perhaps they wish to inculcate a respectful attitude towards mothers-in-law, though all the stories do *not* depict good mothers-in-law; or, there are two kinds of 'mother-in-law stories'—those which depict good mothers-in-law (often suffering under the tyranny of the daughters-in-law) and those which depict bad ones (under whom docile daughters-in-law suffer). But all of them seem to imply an ideal of harmony in the relations of the older and the younger women, with the latter obedient to the former in all cases.

The relationship between a man's wife and his mother receives such great attention in south Indian folktales, proverbs and songs, perhaps because it is fundamental to the home-structure. Indian home-life is usually based on the joint-family system (though it is breaking up in towns), and invariably the daughters-in-law have to live with their husbands' parents. Naturally, there is rivalry between the mother and the wife for a place in the man's heart; hence, jealousy, cruelty, and tyranny on the part of the mother, and a tendency to 'take it out' on the older woman on the part of the younger one when *her* turn comes. Both these consequences are vividly presented in these homely folktales.

There may be another sociological reason also for this rivalry. An ancient Sanskrit text says—a woman depends on her father when she is a maiden, on her husband when married, and on her son when old and

widowed. In a social structure in which an old widowed woman cannot live independently, it is not surprising that she tries to keep the reins in her son's household. It is significant that in none of these tales (so far as I know them) does a father-in-law appear, even as a minor character, and that, in all of them, the older woman is a widow wholly dependent on her son's favour.

While the present tale is one of the many mother-in-law tales told by south Indian women, it is characterised by the absence of persecution. The Clay Mother-in-law seems to play the part of the Grateful Dead, by helping the docile daughter-in-law to gain the treasure. But there is no supernatural element in the present tale, and it does not follow the pattern of the stories where the dead ones repay the living for their devotion.

Perhaps this belongs to Type 1653 B, which tells how robbers under a tree are frightened away by a corpse or a sham dead man. Sometimes a door falls on the robbers from a tree (K 335.1.1). It is interesting to note that this story is usually joined to the story of the literal-minded woman (K 14.13), who guards a door by carrying it with her. The daughter-in-law is really a cousin of the literal-minded woman; she literally obeys the clay mother-in-law and treats it as a live person.

To Type 1653B is joined the envious neighbour motif (N 471). The neighbour finds out all about the night's adventures by eavesdropping, and by the trick of the tamarind (or wax) in the measuring vessel. The latter trick is familiar to readers of the Ali Baba story in *The Arabian Nights*—Type 676 (Open Sesame). This measuring-vessel motif might have been directly borrowed from the Open Sesame tale, which is very well known in India. I have heard a version of the present tale wherein this motif is not present—the neighbours simply overhear the story of the daughter-in-law's adventures in the forest.

Of course, the contrast between the good and stupid character gathering a treasure and the clever but unscrupulous neighbour gathering only trouble is a well-known contrast, found in many moralistic folktales of India and elsewhere.

THE CLAY MOTHER-IN-LAW

Once upon a time, there lived a very docile daughter-in-law. Unlike most other daughters-in-law, she was very obedient to her husband's mother and waited upon her slightest wishes. The old woman kept up her dignity as a mother-in-law by talking very little, by nodding her commands and by a general stiffness of demeanour. Every morning the young housewife

came to the old woman and asked her how many measures ('seers') of rice she should cook for that day. The old woman would ponder over the problem seriously for a while and then hold up her hand; on some days, her hand would show two outstretched fingers, on others three, according to the dictates of her fancy. The daughter-in-law took the commands silently and went into the kitchen to cook two measures or three, as the wrinkled hand commanded.

One day the old woman fell ill and breathed her last. The young woman, like a good daughter-in-law, wept her eyes out. Even after the mourning was over she could not see her way about in the house, for she missed her mother-in-law at every step. Who was there to tell her what to do and when to do it? Who was there to tell her decisively how much she should cook for the day? She was in a perpetual dilemma, unable to take any decision about anything. Her husband was at first pleased with the devotion of his wife to the memory of her mother-in-law, but soon he was tired of answering her eternal questions about measures of rice. He thought of a way out of all this bother; he went to the nearest potter and ordered a clay image of his mother as large as life. He gave special instructions to the potter to make one hand show two fingers and the other three. In a few days the Mud Mother-in-law was ready for use. He brought the life-size doll home and planted it in a prominent place in the hall. The devoted housewife was overjoyed at the return of her long-lost mother-in-law; peace returned to her bosom, for here was an end to all her daily vexations and problems. Whenever she was in doubt about measures of rice, she would look out of the kitchen and take the orders: if she happened to see the two-fingered hand first, she would cook two measures for the day; if she chanced to glimpse the three-fingered hand, that day the rice-pot would overflow with boiling rice. She was happy with her Mud Mother-in-law, and her husband was happy in the happiness of his wife. Things went on smoothly for a month or two; but one day the husband discovered that his rice bags were getting emptied every fortnight, and he had to pay for more and more rice, though there were only two people in the house. He asked his wife and she told him about her daily procedure: how she asked her mother-in-law every morning and how she followed her instructions. 'Two or three measures of rice for just the two of us? Ridiculous! We certainly aren't eating up all the two measures! When my mother was alive you used to cook the same two measures and all the three of us would have our bellies bursting!' he cried in irritation. She replied in a low voice: 'We are not two, but three. You have forgotten my mother-in-law. As usual, I feed her first before eating anything myself. On many days I have very little to eat. Pardon my saying so, my mother-in-law consumes more rice than she used to.'

The husband became suspicious; and as he questioned further, his suspicions deepened. He simply could not believe the fantastic story of a mud mother-in-law guzzling whole bags of rice. He flew into a rage, beat his wife soundly, and threw her out of the house with her mother-in-law.

But the truth about the mud mother-in-law was this: twice every day, the young wife, according to the custom in south India, spread a leaf before her mother-in-law and served all the dishes one by one.[1] But, as soon as she left the hall to resume work in the kitchen, the neighbour's wife came in quietly through a cunningly-made hole in the wall, stole all the food and vanished in the same manner; by this clever device, she had dispensed with all cooking in her own kitchen. The poor fool, all along, believed that her mother-in-law had dined off her leaf, as usual. Her innocence had now landed her in the streets.

The unfortunate young woman was miserable; she held the effigy of her beloved mother-in-law in one arm, and walked in the night, cursing her own fate and praying for a swift death. Her face streaming with tears and afraid of the thickening darkness, she walked on and on till she came to a wood just outside the town. She held her mother-in-law closer, and shivered in the shrieking wilderness. Every sound frightened the poor woman who had never stepped out of her house for years. But terror sharpened her wits. She somehow climbed a tree, and tied herself to an outstretched branch, clinging all the while to her dear-departed mother-in-law. As she sat there trembling, to her dismay she heard loud footfalls. Burly moustached men, with burning torches in their hands, were parting the bushes and coming towards her. By their clothes and murderous looks, she could see that they were thieves. Twigs broke noisily under their heavy feet, as they came right under the tree on which she sat trembling. Being tired after a busy day, they lowered their burdens from their backs and sat down to share the loot. The torches burnt brightly and lit up their cruel faces weirdly. Shadows played upon the tree as the flames danced, and made the wilderness look wilder. The poor timid woman on the branches shivered with mortal dread; and in her violent tremors her grip on the clay mother-in-law loosened, and down it fell with a great thud, right on the gang of thieves under the tree! The thieves were seized with panic and took to their heels, flying in all directions before they knew

what happened. As her precious doll fell from her hands, she fainted in sheer terror and lay unconscious among the branches till the next morning.

Day dawned; the frightened woman woke up as from a nightmare, and the first thing she saw on the forest-floor was her clay mother-in-law in three pieces amid countless treasures and some extinguished torches. After making sure that there was no one nearby, she gingerly climbed down, and gathered up her precious mother-in-law who was now in three pieces. She prayed to her dear-departed with fervent devotion for having saved her in calamity and for having presented her with an undreamt of treasure, to boot!

A few hours later, the furious husband saw his wife at his door again, with a broken doll in one arm and an odd-looking bundle in another. He scolded her at first for coming back, but soon learnt of the precious fortune she had brought. Hastily he dragged her inside the house and heard the story in all its details. His eyes nearly popped out with amazement as he saw the rubies and the jewels in the bundle. He kept them all aside safely. With her help, he found his way to the forest, bundled up all the remaining loot, and secretly brought home valuables worth a kingdom.

As he spread his treasures on the floor and sorted them out, he was seized with a desire to estimate it all, to know how much he was worth on that day of grace. He sent his wife to the neighbour's house, to borrow a measuring-vessel, which she obediently procured.

The neighbour was curious to know what these poor people had that day to measure in such haste. So he stuck a piece of tamarind at the bottom when he lent his 'seer' (measuring-vessel). When the measure was returned to him after its use was over, the neighbour and his wife were dumbfounded with amazement to see a brilliant gem, and questioned all possibilities in the hope of puzzling out the mystery of their neighbour's fabulous wealth. He was nearly penniless yesterday, but overnight he had amassed a treasure—enough to be measured by the 'seer'! The mystery deepened as they thought about it. The neighbour set his wife on the trail of the mystery, and she questioned the guileless young woman at the first opportunity. The witless woman poured out a breathless tale of all her wondrous adventures—how she was driven out and how she stayed in a tree with her mother-in-law and all the rest of it—and ended by saying that all their wealth was the fruit of her mother-in-law's grace.

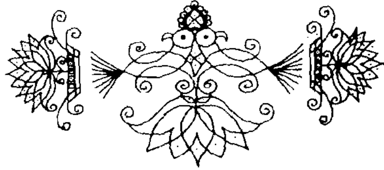
The clever neighbour knew better than to believe in devoting herself to a dead mother-in-law. Her husband thought that here was a short-cut to fortune. He too got a big doll made, put it in the arms of his wife, and

left her in the jungle. He threatened her that he would never take her back into the house unless she brought *her* husband as much fortune as the neighbour's wife had done.

Now, this woman was confident of her plans and had thought out the strategy carefully. As expected, the same thieves with torches in hand came there, after their day's wicked work, to share the loot under the tree. Hardly did they untie their bundles, when the woman on the tree threw down her doll into their midst. There was a terrific crash. At once, the thieves took to their heels; but their suspicions were aroused. The first night they were caught unawares. But, on the second night, they resolved to get to the root of the matter; so, they hid themselves behind the tree-trunks. To their great chagrin, they saw a woman alighting from the tree and robbing them of their hard-won riches. With shouts of anger, they closed in upon her, scolded her heartily for having scared them out of their treasure the night before, beat her till she was quite blue and faint, and left her tied up to the tree.

The clever neighbour found her next day, very nearly crazed with fear, very much the worse for her night's treasure-hunt, but none the richer.

Some Folktales from India



I

The following story may be heard in the Kannada-speaking as well as the Tamil-speaking areas of south India. My mother told me this story in Tamil; she heard it from her mother, who heard it from an aunt of hers, in the Trichinopoly District.

The present tale seems to be Type 503, with a mixture of Type 563 (Magic Objects: The Wishing Table, etc.). But all stories of magic objects follow a general pattern; 'there is the extra-ordinary manner in which the objects are acquired, the use of the objects by the hero, the loss (usually by theft), and the final recovery.' The present tale, while using the Magic Object (D 1472.1.7 Magic Self-Supplying Tables) motif, does not follow the general pattern of such stories. But it is closer to Type 503, in itself and in its variants. Type 503 runs like this. A hunchback comes across the 'little folk' or fairies as they are dancing. He gains their favour by dancing or singing, or by letting them shave him. The fairies reward him by taking off his hump and sometimes by giving him gold. He has an avaricious companion who thinks he will imitate the hero's good fortune. But the angry fairies give him the hump they have taken from the other, and where he had expected gold they give him some worthless coals. (This summary is adapted from Stith Thompson's *The Folktale.*) Thompson, after speaking of the distribution of the tale, in France, Ireland, Belgium, Italy and Germany, arrives at the conclusion that 'it seems to be confined to Western Europe' though, 'by some accident of long-distance transmission, the story appears with fair faithfulness in a Japanese collection.' But I was surprised to hear several variants of this tale in south India. In one variant (Kannada), told by a school-master in Mysore, Type 503 is faithfully represented, with just one change. A poor man has protruding teeth which make him a forbidding creature. He carries a bundle of cooked rice (as in the present tale) to the forest and falls asleep under a tree.

The tree-spirits take his rice and leave a magic bowl behind. When he shakes the vessel, his ugly teeth vanish and food falls from the bowl. (In the present tale, the teeth and the hump are absent, and the bowl brings forth nymphs who serve the food). As in Type 503, there is an avaricious companion who imitates him; he also receives the bowl, which, instead of giving him food, gives him the buck teeth of the poor man. Though the Magic Object motif is present, the barbers do not appear.

The other variant is in Tamil: it was collected by Pandit S. M. Natesa Sastri, a pioneer in collecting Tamil folktales; he calls it The Five Cups. In this variant, the hero is a poor brahman, who goes to the forest with a bundle of rice. He sleeps under an *ingudi* tree after tying up the bundle to one of the branches. God Parameswara and his wife Parvati pass that way, and Parvati, being hungry, takes the bundle. The rest of the story is almost the same as ours, but the number of bowls is five.

So, it seems to me, that Type 503 is not confined to Western Europe. Further investigation into other south Indian languages may unearth more variants.

The present tale contains two motifs which seem to me very interesting: the stale rice pleases the spirits because they had never tasted it before, and the rich man is punished by barbers conjured up from the bowls. I have not been able to trace any motifs similar to these in Thompson's Motif Index given in his book on the folktale. As I have no access to the full *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, my investigation is necessarily inconclusive.

THE MAGIC BOWLS

In a certain village there lived a very poor man with his wife. His wife was a terrible nag and she scolded him every day for being a lazy good-for-nothing. The poor fellow would listen to all the abuse patiently and slip out of the house at the first opportunity. He would stay out till the storm blew over.

One day she grew very angry with him for his poverty which was really no fault of his. She mustered whatever stale food was available in the hut, and tying it up in a piece of dirty cloth, thrust it into his hand and sent him packing. 'Go to the nearby town and earn something to keep body and soul together. What is the use of dawdling in this godforsaken village? Don't come back till you get something!'—these were her last words before she slammed the door in his face.

Cursing his fate, the man took his bundle of cold rice and trudged sadly out of the village. He walked barefoot a few miles on a lonely road, and

came to a place where three roads crossed. A huge banyan tree had grown up there, and lent its hospitable shade to weary travellers. The town was still miles away, and the man sat down to rest in the shade. Soon the rice-bundle lay by his side and he was fast asleep, his head pillowed on the thick roots of the banyan.

Now, there were spirits dwelling on the banyan. They sighted the sleeping man below, and were seized with a desire to taste his precious dinner. No sooner did they think of it than it was done. What is more, they liked it. They had tasted nectar and all the dishes of heaven, but this was something new. Because they had never tasted stale rice before, it had a wonderful flavour of its own. What a change it was from their dull daily routine of nectar and ambrosia!

The few handfuls of rice were just enough for a round among the tree-spirits. They were pleased, and thought they should give their poor sleeping host something in return for the food they had taken away.

When the poor man woke up, his first thought was of his precious bundle. He looked for it, right and left; but, to his dismay, he found four empty bowls under the tree and nothing else. His dinner was gone, vanished into thin air. Raging with hunger, he took the empty bowls and banged them on the ground. But, lo! at once several lovely maidens appeared, with the finest dishes in their hands, awaiting orders! He was stunned by the magic of it all, but he was too hungry to be frightened. As he fell to, the lovely maidens served him gently, attended to his slightest nods, and treated him like a very god. Soon he learnt to believe that he was the master of these immortal nymphs. His miraculous dinner over, his heavenly servants disappeared without a trace.

Praying gratefully to all the gods, he picked up the empty bowls with tender reverence. He held them close to his bosom and hastened home big with his story. His wife nearly burst with joy and gratitude at their extraordinary good fortune. They kept their magic bowls at the feet of the household gods and looked at them again and again as if they could not believe their own eyes. They felt that there was divinity in the bowls. They decided that they should use their good fortune worshipfully, only after offering public prayers to the Almighty and charity to men.

Even as day dawned, the man was out of his house; he went to every door and invited every householder in the village, the rich and the poor together. Everyone was incredulous. Some laughed; others thought it a practical joke. There is a proverb: 'The guests of the poor come back home very soon.'

All the invitees gathered by midnoon in the small hovel; many of them had come fully fed as a precaution against a mean dinner. But they were surprised almost out of their wits, when the poor man and his wife brought out four odd-looking vessels and respectfully requested them to bestow upon the guests their gracious gifts. Lo and behold, dozens of maidens, each seeming more beautiful than the others, adorned to the fingertips, rose elegantly out of the bowls. In their hands were the daintiest dishes. . . . In a twinkling, silver plates appeared before the bewildered guests, and service began. As the guests ate, new dishes arrived by the score, and the heavenly waitresses served them so readily that one felt that they forestalled one's very thoughts. The guests were fed till their bellies burst, and they were hard put to carry themselves home. The little village was agog with the sensation. The erstwhile poor man was the rage of the village folk for months. He even began to prosper.

Now, there was a rich man in the village who thought greatly of himself. He grew envious of the growing wealth and popularity of a man who was a penniless beggar only yesterday. He went to the house of his fortunate fellow-villager one day and he gazed at the marvel of the bowls and at all the lovely maidens rising from them for the mere asking. He eagerly made friends with their owner, gave him presents, and soon wormed the secret out of him.

He was delighted at the ease of the task. Fired with the spirit of rivalry, he asked his best cook to make the most sumptuous dishes at once. Next morning, he travelled in a palanquin breathlessly to the magic spot where three roads crossed. He arranged a big basket, full of the finest dishes he could command, just under the banyan tree, dismissed his servant until evening, and composed himself as if for sleep. Of course he never slept, he was too curious to see the gods and their ways. He lay there a long time, waiting and restless with expectation. But somehow sleep stole over him. And when he woke up all in a hurry, he saw beside him the coveted bowls, and his basket all empty! He had succeeded; but he never dreamt he wouldn't—he had brought for the gods the tastiest, the richest, the most royal of all human dishes! The gods couldn't help being kind with him, he thought. Here, before him, for all who had eyes to see, was the full evidence of their pleasure—the Bowls!

He hastened home as fast as his servants could carry him. He called forth all his attendants and sent them post-haste with the news and the invitation to every nook and corner of the village. Soon, the people flocked to his dining halls, eager for unforeseen pleasures. Their mouths watered with the memory of the recent banquet; here was another, a rich man's! Many even fasted that day, intending to do full justice to his hospitality.

The rich man, beaming with pride at his achievement, motioned them

to their seats. Servants brought the magic bowls to the hall with great ceremony, and placed them on a high pedestal. Adorned with a lace turban, wearing ear rings and turquoises, their master stood before them and loudly ordered them to bring forth a divine banquet for the august assembly.

Hardly had his voice stopped ringing, than out came dozens of big burly muscular men! One after another they followed—they had sinewy rolls of muscle on their arms, and looks that would have frightened the hardiest of men. As soon as they came out they seized the bejewelled host and all his hungry guests; and whipping out gleaming razors, silently shaved their heads till they were clean and shiny, like bronze bowls! Not a single guest escaped the Barbers' Banquet! And as the shame-stricken and baffled guests sneaked out, a muscular immortal at the door held a fine mirror to their faces, and obliged them to take a good look at their remarkable selves, before they left the hall for ever!

The gods of the banyan tree had played a trick on the rich man and punished him for his vain spirit of rivalry.

II

A schoolboy of Kittur (in the Kannada-speaking area) wrote down this story for me; he heard it from a member of his family. I think it has never before been collected, and is a genuine folktale. It is also typical of many romantic oral tales current in the region.

It is rather loose in structure, and strings together many motifs. Like most such romantic folktales, it moves within a realistic framework. 'In tales of magic is always found some supernatural factor and generally likewise the religious; whereas the romantic stories move entirely within the bounds of possibility,' says Aarne.

Such tales combine too many episodes to fall into any one particular type. Hanchi, like the Goose Girl (Type 533) has golden hair.[1] She is a banished maiden (Type 709), but she is not banished by a cruel stepmother, as in Snow White, but by her own mother; even the motivation is unfamiliar—the fear of unnatural brother-sister marriage. The clay-mask, which makes her face look ugly for a time, seems to relate the tale to that of the Loathly Lady (Motif D732), where an ugly maiden is restored to beauty by the love of a younger son of the royal family. But here there is no magical transformation, as in Motif D732, but a perfectly natural casting-off of the mask.

That is the first part of the story, and it is linked to a second, almost independent, part: the attempt at seduction. There is a trickster magician, who tries to throw a spell on Hanchi; but she foils his spell, which returns upon the magician himself. (I am not able to find any number for this motif in the abridged index given at the end of Thompson's *The Folktale*; it may be in the group K1600–K1699, Deceiver Falls Into His Own Trap.) Then the faithful wife Hanchi is persecuted on a false charge of adultery—a very common motif in Indian folktales.

The next few motifs in the complex tale are well-known ones, but a peculiar twist is given to them. In Motif K1574, the Trickster as sham-magician buys a chest containing a hidden paramour; but in the tale of Hanchi, the chest contains the supposed adultress herself, and the trickster wishes to have her for himself.

Then appears Motif K526, 'Captor's Bag Filled With Animals.' But here too there is an interesting variation. The villain lies to the old woman that there are mad dogs in the box; he returns to find his lie come true. The nemesis of the villain is brought about by the old woman helper (N825.3), a very common character in south Indian folktales; the biter is bit, by what he thinks is a supernatural intervention.

The final identification of the heroine is achieved, not by the usual Chastity Tests, but by a very homely detail—the exceptional excellence of Hanchi's rice dishes.

THE ADVENTURES OF HANCHI

Once upon a time there lived an old woman who had two children—a son and a daughter. The girl had golden hair, but the brother had not noticed it. One day, when both of them were grown up and the girl was a lovely young woman with hair of gold, he happened to notice it, and at once fell in love with her.

He went to his mother and begged her to give his sister in marriage to him. The poor old woman was shocked and greatly distressed by this unnatural request. But she hid her feelings and sent him to the nearby town to bring all the rice and flour and pulses necessary for the wedding. As soon as he left the house she came to her daughter in grief, and said to her, 'My daughter, the time has come when you must leave me. You are as good as dead to me after this day. You are too beautiful to live here in safety. You have hair of gold on which no one can gaze without desire. So I shall get a mask made for you, which will hide your face and save you from future danger.' That very night she went to the potter and gave him a gold vessel and bought a clay mask to fit her daughter's face. That

very night she sent away her daughter with the parting words of advice—'Never remove the mask from your face, till your situation is better.' As soon as her daughter was gone, the poor woman poisoned herself in utter grief. The son came home next day, found his sister-bride gone, and his mother dead; he was crazed in his wits by the double calamity, and became a wandering madman.

The girl wandered from place to place as long as her mother's parting gift of bread and rice lasted. She changed her name to Hanchi.[2] She would sit by wayside brooks, untie her bundle of bread, and she would lunch in the noonday sunshine and dine by moonlight.

At last she came to a place very far from her home-town and struck up acquaintance with an old woman who gave her food and shelter. One day the old woman came home with the news that a nearby *saukar* (rich man) wanted a maidservant, and that she had arranged to send Hanchi to the place. Hanchi agreed and went to the big house as a maidservant. She was an expert cook and no one could equal her in making dishes of sweet rice. Once, the *saukar* wished to banquet in the orchard and ordered Hanchi to make her dishes of sweet rice. That day, everyone in the household went to the orchard for the grand banquet—everyone, except Hanchi and a younger son of the *saukar*. Hanchi thought she was alone, so she heated water for an oil bath. She wished to finish her bath before they returned; she undid her splendid golden hair and took off her mask and started bathing. Meanwhile the young man who had gone out somewhere, came back home, and shouted for the maid. Hanchi did not hear him, as she was in the bathroom. Impatiently, he came in search of her, and saw her in all her beauty. He ran away before she saw him; but he fell deeply in love with the glory that was her hair and resolved at once to make her his wife.

He went to his mother as soon as she returned from the orchard, took her aside, and told her of his resolve. But she was puzzled at her son's fascination for a dark maidservant. She asked him not to make a fool of himself for a dusky unlovely lass, and promised to get him a really good-looking bride from a rich family. But he would not hear of it. At the end of a heated argument, he took her to Hanchi, snatched her mask and dashed it to the ground. There was Hanchi, in all her natural loveliness, crowned by her splendid tresses of gold. The mother was struck dumb by this extraordinary beauty, and found her son's infatuation quite understandable. Moreover she had always liked her modest good-natured Hanchi. She took the bashful Hanchi with her to her inner chamber, listened to her strange story, and liked her all the better for it. At the first auspicious moment, Hanchi was married to the young lover.

The newly-weds were as happy as two doves in love. But there was a man named Guruswami in the *saukar's* house; he was the rich man's chief counsellor, and had a reputation for secret lore and black art of many kinds. This man had an eye on Hanchi and wanted her for himself. So, when one day Hanchi's mother-in-law told him of her eagerness to see a grandson by Hanchi, he had his plan ready. He told her that he could make Hanchi conceive with the help of his magic arts, and asked her to bring him plantains, almonds, betel leaves, nuts, etc.

On an auspicious day Guruswami called Hanchi to him. He had before him all the fruits and nuts over which he had chanted his magical formulae.[3] If she had eaten them, the magic in them would have worked on her, and taken her to him as if by hypnosis. Chanting words of magic, and praying that Hanchi should become his, he gave her a plantain. Hanchi was a clever girl and knew all about these wicked magicians. She secretly dropped the enchanted plantain into a vessel and ate another which she had brought with her. Guruswami went to his room, trusting that his magic would draw her to him and throw her into his waiting arms. While he lay waiting wickedly for her, and dreaming dreams of lust, a buffalo ate the enchanted plantain in the vessel and fell in love with Guruswami. It was in heat and came running to Guruswami's chamber and pushed at his door. Thinking that the Hanchi of his dreams had come to his arms, he hastily opened the door and was badly bruised by the amorous buffalo.

But he did not leave off. On several days he asked Hanchi's gullible mother-in-law to send Hanchi to him for certain rites. When she came, he gave her his enchanted almonds, betel leaves, and nuts. But the clever Hanchi played the same old trick on him, and ate harmless almonds, leaves, and nuts which she had carefully brought with her. She palmed away Guruswami's gifts, and put them into measures and bowls; once, she threw the nuts at a broom stick in the corner. Every time, as Guruswami lay waiting for her in his bedroom, the measures and vessels came and knocked on his door; he hastily opened his door for the long-awaited Hanchi, and instead of her tender caresses, received hard blows from inanimate vessels which were irresistibly drawn to him by his own magic. When, one day, he opened the door and received a thorny broomstick into his greedy arms, he accepted failure; he changed his tactics.

He went to his friend, Hanchi's father-in-law, and suggested that he should give another of his magnificent banquets in the garden. The old

man agreed. As before, Hanchi prepared her fine dishes of sweet rice, and like a good daughter-in-law stayed back—to look after the house while everyone was away.

When everyone was at the orchard banquet, Guruswami found an excuse to go back home to Hanchi. He told the company that he had left behind his books of chants and prayers, and hurried home. On his way, he took many pieces of men's clothing like coats, shawls and turbans; he entered Hanchi's room secretly and 'planted' all the men's clothing there, threw bits of chewed betel and smoked stubs of cheroot on the floor.

After planting all his false evidence in Hanchi's room, he ran breathlessly to the garden where all the family sat in banquet, and cried, 'Your daughter-in-law is an immoral woman! I surprised her with a paramour, just a moment ago. She has forgotten the dignity of her family, her womanhood. This is sinful; it will bring misfortune to your door! O what wickedness!' At these shocking words from their trusted family-friend, all of them ran to the house in great confusion. With righteous indignation, Guruswami showed them all the hidden clothing, the tell-tale cheroot stubs and betel-pieces, as unquestionable evidence of Hanchi's adultery. Hanchi was as surprised as the rest of them, and all her protests were just a cry in the wilderness. When she accused Guruswami himself of unholy intentions towards her, they were all so enraged that they beat her till she was blue in the face. When she found that everyone was against her, she was silent and trusted to her fate. They shut her up and starved her for three days, but they got no confession from her. Her resolute silence put her husband and his father into fits of rage. Then, Guruswami, finding that his plot had prospered, put in a timely suggestion; 'All this will not work with this hard-hearted woman. We must punish her properly for this heinous sin. Put her into a big box and give it to me; I will have it thrown into the river. You are too tender for this sinner. Punish her as she deserves!'

Anger and shame had made them blind. They gave ear to Guruswami's words and she was soon shut up in a box and handed over to Guruswami. He had it carried out of the house—happy that his plot succeeded without a hitch.

Then he thought of a way of getting rid of the servants. He asked them to carry the box to an old woman's house nearby and leave it there till next morning, as the river was still a long way off. The old woman was no other than the good friend of Hanchi, with whose help she had first settled down in the town. Guruswami told her that there were mad dogs imprisoned in

the box, to be thrown into the river out of harm's way. He asked her to be mighty careful with it, not to meddle with it, or open it, lest the dogs be let loose. When he left her he had frightened her more than he intended to. He promised that he would soon come back to take the dangerous dogs away.

As soon as he left, the old woman heard peculiar noises coming from the box. At first, she thought it was the dogs; but soon curiosity overcame fear and she could hear her own name being called out in urgent tones. Soon after the box was set down, Hanchi had recognised her old friend, and was calling for help. The old woman cautiously prised open the lid and, to her great astonishment, found Hanchi crouching uncomfortably inside the box! She helped the poor girl out of her little prison, gave her food and drink first, as she appeared to be ravenously hungry. Hanchi told her all about her misfortune and the wicked Guruswami's villainous plot to have his will with her. The old woman heard her story with sympathy, and her motherwit soon found a way out of this tangle. She hid Hanchi in an inner room, went into the town, procured a muzzled mad dog, and locked it up in the box. She had taken care to loosen the muzzle, before she locked up the dog.

Guruswami was back very soon. He was eager to taste his new-won power over Hanchi. He came singing. When he examined the locks, the old woman assured him in frightened tones that she did not even dare to touch the box. He asked her to leave him alone in the room for his evening prayers; the clever old woman went out, smiling to herself.

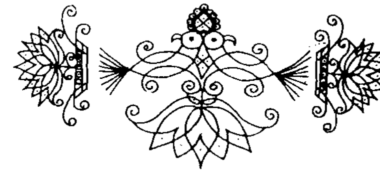
He closed the door carefully and bolted it from the inside. And, calling Hanchi in loving tones, he eagerly threw open the lid of the box. His heart leapt almost to his mouth when he saw a hideous dog foaming at the mouth spring upon him, mangling him horribly with its reckless bites. He cursed his own wickedness and cried that he was served right by the all-seeing God, who had transformed a woman into a dog! Thus cursing himself, he sank down under the dog's savage tearing teeth. The neighbours soon gathered there, drawn by the cries of the wretched man, and killed the dog. But they could not save Guruswami, who was fatally infected with the dog's lunacy.

Hanchi's husband and his family were a little surprised at Guruswami's fate, and pitied him. But one day they were invited by the scheming old woman to her house. The good woman could not rest till she had seen justice done to poor Hanchi. When Hanchi's people came, she served them with wonderful dishes of sweet rice, which no one could prepare but Hanchi. They were all reminded of her and felt sad. They naturally asked

who the excellent cook was who had equalled Hanchi. Instead of a reply, the old woman presented Hanchi herself in the flesh. They were amazed and would not believe their eyes. They believed that Hanchi was dead and gone, drowned beyond return in the river; Guruswami had done it for them, and the poor fellow had gone mysteriously mad soon after. The old woman cleared up the mystery of Hanchi's resurrection by telling them the true story about her and the villain of the plot, Guruswami.

They were very sorry for Hanchi and were ashamed that they were taken in by such a viper as Guruswami. They cursed him heartily and asked Hanchi to pardon them. Hanchi's good days had begun; her luck turned, and furnished her with every kind of happiness from that day.

Hanchi: A Kannada Cinderella



I

In this essay, I attempt a study of individuation in a well-known folktale, 'The Story of Hanchi'. Worldwide types, forms, and motifs are reworked by a local (illiterate) teller into a uniquely patterned *story*. Both the pattern and the motifs are seen as signifiers. Though the typical structures are common, the realised tale means different things in different cultures, times, and media. It is regarded here not merely as the variant of a tale-type, a cultural object, a psychological witness (or symptom), etc., but primarily as an *aesthetic* work. I believe that, in such tales, the aesthetic is the first and the experienced dimension, through which ethos and worldview are revealed. The other kinds of meanings (psychological, social, etc.) are created and carried by the primary, experiential, aesthetic forms and meanings. The text of 'The Story of Hanchi', in English translation, is provided in Chapter 20, 'Some Folktales from India', above.[1] It is based on the Kannada story I heard in 1955 in Kittur, a north Karnatak village, from a sixty-five-year-old Vīraśaiva woman named Chennamma; a schoolboy in her family wrote it down for me.

The Aarne-Thompson Index identifies the general type for this story as 510. Their archetype or composite is reconstructed from variants found all over the world (1961, 175–78; see also Cox 1893; Rooth 1951).

510 Cinderella and Cap o' Rushes

(i) *The Persecuted Heroine.* (*a*) The heroine is abused by her stepmother and stepsisters and (a^1) stays on the hearth or in the ashes, and (a^2) is dressed in rough clothing—cap of rushes, wooden cloak, etc.; (*b*) flees in disguise from her father who wants to marry her; or (*c*) is cast out by him because she has said that she loved him like salt; or (*d*) is to be killed by a servant.

(*ii*) *Magic Help.* While she is acting as servant (at home or among strangers) she is advised, provided for, and fed (*a*) by her dead mother, (*b*) by a tree on the

mother's grave, or (*c*) by a supernatural being, or (*d*) by birds, or (*e*) by a goat, or a sheep, or a cow. (*f*) When the goat (cow) is killed, from her remains there springs up a magic tree.

(*iii*) *Meeting the Prince*. (*a*) She dances in beautiful clothing several times with a prince who seeks in vain to keep her, or she is seen by him in church. (*b*) She gives hints of the abuse she has endured as servant girl, or (*c*) she is seen in her beautiful clothing in her room or in the church.

(*iv*) *Proof of Identity*. (*a*) She is discovered through the slipper-test, or (*b*) through a ring which she throws into the prince's drink or bakes in his bread. (*c*) She alone is able to pluck the gold apple desired by the knight.

(*v*) *Marriage with the Prince*.

(*vi*) *Value of Salt*. Her father is served unsalted food and thus learns the meaning of her earlier answer.

Of these possibilities, 'The Story of Hanchi' realises the following.

(*i*) *The Persecuted Heroine*: (*b*) The heroine flees in disguise from her father (here, her brother) who wants to marry her.

(*ii*) (Magic) *Help*: (*a*) While she is acting as servant (at home or among strangers) she is advised, provided for, and fed by a kind old mother-figure (a variant of the dead mother?).

(*iii*) *Meeting the Prince*: (*c*) Instead of being seen in beautiful clothing, she is seen without her mask (naked?). N716.

(*iv*) *Proof of Identity*: She is discovered through a special dish which identifies her—none of (*iv*) (*a*), (*b*), or (*c*).

(*v*) *Marriage with the Prince*.

I have one other Kannada variant which stops here. But our story goes on to a second move, in Propp's sense, with a second villain-figure who initiates the action again (Propp 1968). This is really the tale of the Lecherous Holy Man and Maiden in Box (Type 896), which seems to be a special Indian oicotype; the Type Index lists fifteen Indian variants and none from any other part of the world.[2] The Hanchi story is distinguished from the other ten Indian variants by the presence of Type 896, which provides it with a second move (see Thompson and Roberts 1960, 73).

II

Is the addition of Type 896 to Type 510 arbitrary? Does the addition serve a new structure, make a difference in meaning? I think it does both.

The addition of Type 866 is remarkably apt, for it makes for a perfect symmetry between the two parts of 'The Story of Hanchi'. One could display them in a chart as follows.[3]

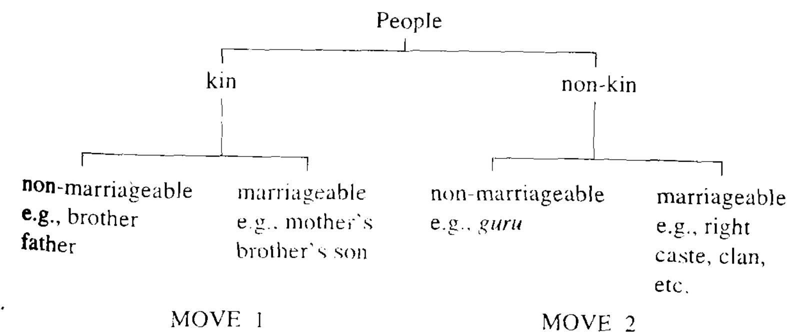
Move 1

1. Brother desires Hanchi.
2. She wears a mask, hides her face.
3. Exile; old woman as mother-figure.
4. a. The food episode,
   b. which leads to her discovery and marriage.
5. Brother goes mad.

Move 2

1. Lecherous *guru* desires Hanchi. His efforts to seduce her, repeated thrice.[4] *Type 896.*
2. a. She is put in a box; her body hidden from her family till the end.
   b. She is hidden in the old woman's house.
3. Exile; the old woman again.
4. a. Another food episode, which leads to rediscovery and reunion.
5. *Guru* goes mad.

Now, we might ask, what is the function of this two-move structure? I'd suggest that structures of this kind, found at whatever 'level' of abstraction, are signifiers. Here the two moves enact and signify the two threats (temptations?) of a family woman: incest and adultery. Move 1 shows Hanchi fleeing the first, Move 2 shows her withstanding the second. Till she has successfully faced both tests, her marriage is not secure, and she is not a mature wife. Chastity in the Hindu sense is not celibacy, absence of sex, but sex within marriage; it is synonymous with fidelity, as well as with an endurance of ordeals to prove it. It is a *vrata*, a vow, an observance that requires character. Threats to chastity by near kin like fathers and brothers as well as by non-kin have to be withstood, till one finds a marriageable kin or non-kin. The world is divided into kin/non-kin, and further into marriageable/non-marriageable:



Though the second possibility (marriageable kin) is not explored here, it often is in other tales: a woman (or man) is threatened by marriage to

a relative who is crippled or cruel, and has to flee him (or her), toward an eligible, proper groom. The Hanchi tale dramatises the ramifications of a joint family, the threats and temptations of incest and adultery it poses. I might add here that both kinds of threats are amply attested in other tales of the area: the popularity of Type 896 speaks for the one; the frequency of motifs and tales of what I've called the Indian Oedipus type—father-figures desiring daughter-figures—are evidence of this preoccupation (see Chapter 22, 'The Indian Oedipus', below). Tradition also warrants our seeing the *guru* as a father-figure outside the family.

As Hanchi moves from Move 1 to Move 2, she is really moving through the 'initiatory scenario' of a chaste wife (*pativratā*). If we collapsed the brother and the *guru* into a single 'villain-function', as Propp would probably do, we would lose the above meanings.

III

Can we go one step further and ask: Is there a 'deeper' structure? Can we do a summation of the structural ratios, the symmetries of correspondence? In each, the heroine is threatened; goes into exile, obscurity, or hiding; and emerges with a new or renewed relationship. Both the moves have a single pattern. If we were Solar Mythologists, we could see it as Danger/Eclipse/Release (Dorson 1965). Certainly the following formulae seem to fit the pattern: Disguise/Discovery, Losing Self/Finding Self, Being Lost/Being Found. However we phrase it, this pattern seems to characterise all Type 510 Cinderella tales. We need ask again of this pattern or 'deep structure' or 'ratio': What does it signify (Levi-Strauss 1963)? For structures are not meanings, but carriers of meanings, signifiers that are rendered into signs by the given culture (in space, time, or society). Even the 'deepest' structures have to be *interpreted*[5] culturally or individually, depending on our point of view. Our summary phrases like Losing Self/Finding Self suggest only partially the possible meanings.

What do the two-move structures mean (in north Karnataka), with their twice-repeated Disguise/Discovery pattern? I think that the cultural meanings of this double structure will be illuminated by a comparison with a European Cinderella story. I shall use Grimm's well-known 'Aschenputtel' in Manheim's translation (1977, 83–89). The Grimm tale also has a structure of two moves, but they are not symmetrical. One could use episode labels similar to those of Hanchi and display them thus:

ASCHENPUTTEL

Move 1 Loss of mother leads to the dominance of stepmother and stepsisters.
Living among ashes, cinders, etc., which obscure her true beauty.
Discovery at a feast (three times).
Meets the Prince; leaves a slipper behind.

Move 2. Exile again among the ashes.
Search for the owner of the slipper.
Stepsisters cut off toes and heels to wear the slipper.
Aschenputtel's foot fits the slipper perfectly.
The Prince marries her.

Despite important difference (the presence of Good and Bad Mothers, the important theme of sibling rivalry, a dead mother's magic help), the shared two-move structure is clear: disguise and discovery, being found by a Prince-figure temporarily in the first move, eluding him again, being rediscovered through an object identified with her (slipper in 'Cinderella/Aschenputtel', food in 'Hanchi'), and re-uniting with the Prince firmly and permanently.

The European tale is not necessarily about a girl; as Bettelheim points out, and as I have found in classes, it appeals to both boys and girls (1976, 236). Bettelheim's psychoanalytic essay sees the following themes in 'Aschenputtel': the agony of sibling rivalry, maturity through suffering (dwelling in ashes), the growth of basic trust (a sprig is nurtured into a tree), being loved for one's true character and beauty though dressed in rags. The slipper itself is a symbol of the vagina (for the complementary symbolism of foot and slipper, like finger and ring, see Bettelheim 1976, 272).[6]

I see in the European tale another important theme, which is enacted by the two-move structure: the Dream Coming True. This theme is best seen in the seventeenth-century courtly Perrault version. In the first part, the dream of 'making it', and marrying a Prince, is partially realised. As the widely popular Perrault version emphasises, realisation is *conditional*. Cinderella can 'have a ball' only till the witching hour of twelve o'clock. But the dream-experience leaves behind a remnant in reality, the slipper, which leads the Prince back to his elusive beauty and identifies her securely; the remnant helps them reconstruct the entire dream fully, unconditionally, and on firm ground, triumphing over a life of ashes, cruel mother-figures and siblings, and the insecure transience of a dream.

IV

A classical Indian tale reworked by Kālidāsa (fifth century?) into a great seven-act play, *Śakuntalā*, has the same kind of Cinderella-pattern.[7] In it king Duṣyanta meets Śakuntalā, illegitimate child of a celestial nymph, now dressed in bark garments and living as the foster-daughter of a hermit. They fall in love and marry by a special private rite. His royal duties take him back to his capital, but he leaves a signet ring with his beloved Śakuntalā as a love-token and an identification. While she is languishing in the hermitage, an irascible, touchy hermit finds her inhospitable and places a curse on her that she will be forgotten by her husband till he sees the ring. She is pregnant, and her good foster-father sends her to king Duṣyanta who, under the curse, has no memory of her; he accuses her of being a scheming, loose woman. The insulted and rejected Śakuntalā is carried off by her celestial mother.

Fishermen find Śakuntalā's ring in the maw of a fish and are dragged before the king. His memory returns when he sees the ring, his love-token, here truly a 'memento'. But Śakuntalā is nowhere to be found, and he is grief-stricken. Years later, returning from a war, Dushyanta visits a hermitage and admires a small boy wrestling with a lion cub: the boy is his own son. The lovers are reunited.

Here too, in an unexpected place, we find a Cinderella. Śakuntalā is in exile, her beauty and true divine origin obscured by her bark garments. The king finds her, and their union is temporary. In the second move, she is slandered, forgotten, and exiled (like Hanchi) due to a curse by Durvasa (a *guru*, a father-figure). It is the loss and recovery of a ring associated with her that reunites the lovers, permanently.[8] The ring is then displayed by the child (who is already in Śakuntalā's womb when she is rejected) in sealing the reunion.

In this play, the two parts enact the growth and trials of love between a man and a woman: the first part shows them in love physically, infatuated, in a state of *kāma* (desire) and *moha* (fascination). The second part, with its separation, rejection, and chastening years of suffering, brings the lovers to a mature marriage of the spirit, an experience of *prema* (love). Other elements, like the imagery of flowers in the early acts and the images of fruition in the later acts, support this view of the play.

Thus we find the same 'deep' structure enacting three different possible meanings in three different cultures: the classical Sanskrit, the Kannada, and the German.

V

In this concluding section, I would like to point to elements in the so-called surface structure, the 'texture' if you will, that signify culturally contrastive meanings. For one thing, Cinderella tales tend to be similar not only in 'deep' structure, but even in particular surface details. For instance, the names of the heroines tend to draw attention to the mode of their disguise: 'Cinderella' from *cinders*, 'Aschenputtel' from *ashes*; 'Katie Woodencoat' and 'Allerleirauh' are other examples (Thompson 1946, 128). Even in faraway Kannada tales, the feature is stable: 'Hanchi' from *hanchu* (clay tile), and 'Maragopi' ('girl of the tree') from *mara* (tree, or wooden [dress]) and *gopi* (girl).

On the other hand, the identifying object is a slipper in the European tale, food in the Kannada, a ring in the classical Sanskrit. Like items of vocabulary in a language, cultural content is clearest in such details—though, as we have seen, even abstract structures must be interpreted for cultural and contextual meanings.[9]

The meanings of the Hanchi tale are subtly carried by a number of culturally significant motifs. For instance, a slipper seems appropriate for a tale of sexually fitting partnership as well as of a dream coming true (rising socially from rags to riches). Food, identified with Hanchi, and identifying her finally, is pervasive in Hindu symbolism (see Chapter 4, 'Food for Thought', above). In this tale, it appears at least five times: when Hanchi leaves her mother, when she is first discovered by her husband-to-be, when the *guru* tries to seduce her with his love-magic, when she is 'discovered' again as an adulteress, and finally when she is reunited with her husband and family. The central importance of food in Hindu ritual and worship, and of food-transactions as markers of caste-rank, is well known (Marriott 1968). Less well-known is the symbolism of food in the sexual realm. The word for eating and (sexual) enjoyment have often the same root, *bhuj*, in Sanskrit. Sexual intercourse is often spoken about as the mutual feeding of male and female. Furthermore, in a story like 'Hanchi', with its theme of attaining proper wifehood, sexuality is inseparable from maternal nurturing. The breast is both wifely and motherly; it is often said that a woman has two breasts, one for her child, another for her husband. That the love-magic used by the seducer involves phallic food objects like bananas and nuts requires no further comment.

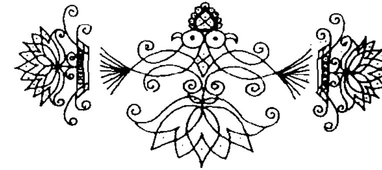
The detail of animals is also significant. The she-buffalo eats the charmed nuts of the lecherous *guru* and *automatically* desires him, unlike

the human Hanchi, and mauls him in a sexual attack. Later, when he lies to the old woman that the box contains a mad dog (and not Hanchi), he finds to his grief that it indeed contains a mad dog. His own animality seems projected onto his partners. In folk-versions of saints' legends (e.g., Allama, the Vīraśaiva saint), the saint-to-be lusts madly after a woman and works hard to get her, but when he finally embraces her she turns into a savage she-bear.

One is struck often by a design among the variants of a central motif—like the disguise of the heroine. For instance, in 'Hanchi' the disguise is by means of a clay mask. If one looks at the Indian variants of this tale-type, one sees the following range: a mask, a wooden coat, an old woman's skin, an animal skin, an actual animal body (tortoise, crab) which is later burned by the beloved or lover to recover the hero(ine)'s human form, and finally a caterpillar.[10] If we do not collapse these variants into an abstract 'motifeme' or function, such as 'disguise', we see that the series points to an interesting transformation: from the clay mask of culture to the use of human and animal skin, to the possibility of inhabiting an animal form (crossing the line between human and animal), and to nature's metamorphosis of caterpillars into butterflies. In an ancient Upaniṣadic image the soul is a caterpillar that moves from form to form. One may ask whether the clay mask, the box in which she is shut up, with the imminent danger of drowning, and her double emergence, do not point to a rebirth theme. The skin-dress motif is an old Hindu motif: the changing of skins, clothes, masks, personae and even bodies in self-transformations (Elwin, 1944). Both snakes and brahmans are called the 'twice-born'. In Hindu coronation and initiation rituals, the initiate wears an antelope-skin; in brahman initiation, a small piece of it is tied to his sacred thread.

Thus, lining up the corresponding details in several variants of the same type, one gains new hypotheses, if not insights. The variants at this 'level' of inquiry form a meaningful series that point to a cultural theme.

The Indian Oedipus



INTRODUCTION

Searching for stories of the Oedipus type (Tale Type 931) some years ago in the myth and folklore of the Indic area (i.e. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), I found very little that looked like the Sophocles play, where a young man kills his father and marries his mother. The very few instances I found were of the following kind. (*a*) A Tamil folk-anecdote about Gaṇeśa. Once Pārvatī asked him who he would like to marry; he replied, 'Someone exactly like you, Mother', and Mother got outraged by such an open incestuous wish and cursed him with everlasting celibacy; that's why he is still a bachelor. (*b*) An averted 'Oedipus' from Tamilnad, Sri Lanka, etc., Indic Type 674. A son grows up without knowing who his true mother is. When full-grown, he sees his mother, falls in love with her (N 365.1.1) and goes to her at night hoping to become her lover. On the way he overhears animals talking (N 451) and learns the truth. (*c*) In certain versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā is Rāvaṇa's daughter, born with a curse on her head that she would bring death to her father. Rāvaṇa tries to get rid of her, and she ends up in a strange northern land where she marries Rāma, gets abducted by unsuspecting Rāvaṇa, and Rāma of course kills him. Son-in-law Rāma can be seen as a substitute son. The father-daughter relations suggested in this story call for further discussion. (*d*) In the *Mahābhārata* and in a popular Kannaḍa *Yakṣagāna* play based on it, Arjuna fights with his own son Babhruvahana who slays his father in battle, but Arjuna is later revived. (*e*) In the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma's sons Lava and Kuśa kill Rāma in battle. (*f*) And there are instances in the *Ṛgveda*: 'Who, O Indra, made thy mother a widow? What god was present in the fray when thou did slay thy father, seizing him by the foot?' (IV. 18.12).

But all these instances seemed to me rather marginal, generally not known or not preserved in the most influential versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* or popular lore. I found nothing as explicit as the Greek

myth. Others have searched before me (e.g., Spratt 1966) and concluded that Indian narrative has no Oedipal tales, and therefore, of course, Indians have no Oedipus-complex. According to one writer, at least, the unfortunate lack of an Oedipus-complex had prevented Indians from developing a form like the novel, or from overthrowing the Mughals or the British by a bloody upheaval, etc., etc.

In the present paper I wish to report on a few Oedipus-like patterns in Indian myth and folklore and suggest an interpretation.[1]

The Oedipus Type (AT 931)

For the purpose of our search, we may briefly look at the familiar European pattern, as in the classical play of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*. A young man, fated to kill his father and marry his mother, tries to escape the curse of fate, but ironically, unwittingly, fulfills it. The Electra-story displays the same relational pattern with the sexes reversed: Electra-figures love their fathers and hate their mothers. For our purposes, all four types of dyadic relations—father/son, mother/son, father/daughter, mother/daughter—will be considered 'Oedipal'. In the Greek myths of Oedipus and Electra:

1. Son kills father.
2. Son marries mother.
3. Daughter loves father, wishes to avenge his death, etc.
4. Daughter hates mother, wants her killed, etc.

If we call 'love, pursue, desire to marry, or wish to do any or all of these' *positive relations* (+ *R*), and 'hate, castrate, kill, or wish to do any or all of these' *negative relations* (– *R*), we get the patterns shown in Figure 1.

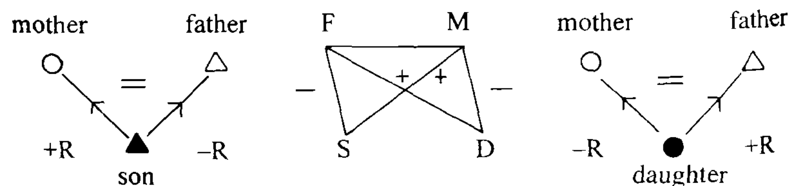


Figure 1

If we extend father, son, mother, daughter to other figures who have similar functions, and on whom these parent-child relations are projected, we have a whole body of narratives which exemplify the pattern of which Hamlet and Oedipus are only two instances. The signal Indian instance is Kṛṣṇa, fated to kill Kaṃsa, his uncle. But no tragic fate befalls Kṛṣṇa, as it befalls Oedipus.

INDIAN EXAMPLES

Relations of Mother and Son

In 1963, an illiterate, half-blind old woman in a north Karnataka village startled me with the following tale.

A girl is born with a curse on her head that she would marry her own son and beget a son by him. As soon as she hears of the curse, she wilfully vows she'd try and escape it: she secludes herself in a dense forest, eating only fruit, forswearing all male company. But when she attains puberty, as fate would have it, she eats a mango from a tree under which a passing king has urinated. The mango impregnates her; bewildered, she gives birth to a male child; she wraps him in a piece of her sari and throws him in a nearby stream. The child is picked up by the king of the next kingdom, and grows up to be a handsome young adventurous prince. He comes hunting in the same jungle, and the accursed woman falls in love with the stranger, telling herself she is not in danger any more as she has no son alive. She marries him and bears him a child. According to custom, the father's swaddling clothes are preserved and brought out for the newborn son. The woman recognises at once the piece of sari with which she had swaddled her first son, now her husband, and understands that her fate has really caught up with her. She waits till everyone is asleep, and sings a lullaby to her newborn baby:

Sleep
O son
O grandson
O brother to my husband
sleep O sleep
sleep well

and hangs herself by the rafter with her sari twisted into a rope.

Since 1963, I have found several variants of this tale from other districts; I have also found Marathi versions collected in neighbouring Maharashtra, and variants in some old Jain texts. In the next few pages we shall examine these variants, discuss the variations episode by episode, comparing parallels in texts and oral traditions, and suggest the significance of each episode.

The tale is strikingly exact in its parallels to the Greek Oedipus, but the narrative point of view is entirely different. It is the mother, the Jocasta-figure, who is accursed, tries to escape her fate, and when finally trammelled in it, it is she who makes the discovery and punishes herself with death. The son is merely a passive actor, a part of his mother's fate—unlike the Greek Oedipus. Such reversals of narrative point of view are yet to be studied in comparative and structural mythology. The Greek and Kannaḍa Oedipus-tales provide a very neat example of a pair of tales in which a *structure* is the same, but the narrative *point of view* is exactly in reverse. Parallels were hard to find earlier because I began with the Greek pattern; the search was too literal-minded, and I did not see that in a different cultural context a familiar pattern may appear standing on its head—the great Indian image of the cosmic tree is the tree with its branches in the earth and its roots in the air.

THE VARIANTS

In the eight variants—three from my fieldnotes, five from other sources (Karve 1950; Dhavaḷaśrī 1968; Paramaśivayya 1970a and 1970b; Lingayya 1971)—I shall consider variations occur at the following points in the sequence.

1. The Prophecy

Instead of a curse, an astrologer's prophecy initiates the action in one. In others there is divine parent: we have Vidhiyammā (Mother Fate) or Seṭi-vitāyī, who writes the fates of newborn babies on their foreheads. When Fate's daughter is twelve years old, she discovers her mother's 'profession' one night when the latter returns from a nocturnal visit to a newborn baby, accosts her, and insists on knowing what she wrote on her own daughter's forehead. When she hears that Mother Fate had written that she (the daughter) would marry her own son, she flies into a rage and proceeds to defy her 'lifescript'.[2] It is significant that the daughter is twelve years old, an age when Indian girls enter puberty.

2. How She Gets Pregnant

In none of the variants does the girl get pregnant by actual sexual intercourse. Only in one variant is semen mentioned: a king sits on her sari spread out to dry in the sun, is excited by it, leaves his seed on it. She wears the sari later and gets big with child. In several she gets pregnant by eating a mango from a tree, or a patch of greens, watered by a king's urine. In one, she drinks from a pool where a bull has urinated. In another, she gets pregnant by drinking water from a pool in which a king has rinsed his mouth. Either way, his body fluids (saliva and urine are two of the polluting body fluids mentioned by the ancient law-giver, Manu—sweat, blood, semen, tears and mother's milk being the others) are treated as capable of impregnating the woman. In other folktales, and in myths, 'blood, sweat and tears' are all seen as capable of making babies. In this worldview, no body fluid is non-sexual, or at least non-procreative. Another interesting aspect here is the confusion of the procreative and alimentary channels, noted by Freud as characteristic of the child's view of reproduction.[3]

3. The Lullaby

Only two variants contain the lullaby at the end which describes the 'unnatural' confusion of kinship relations.[4] Mother marrying son and begetting another son by him collapses generational differences: by this act, son and grandson become one. It conflates the difference between kin by birth and kin by marriage: son and husband become one, so do mother-in-law and mother, and so on. The most fantastic of these kin-confusions is in Jain tales (my examples here are all literary). In one, a courtesan has twins whom she abandons; they grow up separately, meet and marry, but recognise their kinship by the rings they wear; the son travels far, becomes his mother's lover and begets a son; his spouse and sister, who renounces the world, acquires magical vision, comes to warn her mother and brother, sees their son, and addresses him thus:

> O child! you are my brother, brother-in-law, grandson, son of my co-wife, nephew, uncle. Your father is my brother, husband, father, grandfather, father-in-law and son. Your mother is my mother, mother-in-law, co-wife, my brother's wife, grandmother and wife. (Jain 1977, Appendix I, 566; for other examples see Karve 1950)

It is clear that in the Jain examples; the point of the tale is not Fate, nor Oedipal patterns of mother/son relations, but the destruction of the kinship diagram. Such a confusion of clear-cut kinship relations (son/husband, mother/mother-in-law, etc.) would be devastating to a child, would make a shambles of his or her ordered family world. That seems to be part of the terror of the incest-taboo and the poignancy of some of the folktales. (The Jain literary tale defuses the charge of the tale by its clever elaboration and by overdoing the list of paradoxical relations.) The characteristic response to such a disorienting sin in these tales is suicide (of

the mother, the heroine), or a renouncing of the world by the hero. Such a renunciation, a withdrawal from all relations, in Indian terms, is a kind of social suicide—one becomes a *saṃnyāsī* by performing a funeral rite on oneself.

4. *The End*

The end of the tale is interestingly different in three of my variants. Instead of the heroine killing herself or renouncing the world, she recognises that her fate has been fulfilled, or she prays to a goddess who counsels her to accept her fate; she doesn't tell anyone about her incestuous marriage, lives happily with her husband, 'blessed by her aged parents-in-law to whom she was always kind and dutiful'. When anthropologist Karve asked the illiterate Maratha woman (who told the story to her daughter) what she thought of it, she replied, 'But what else could she do? You know, madam, it was written so'. Not only that; Karve says, 'At the end of the tale my little daughter and the narrator were both laughing at the queerness of the happening' (Karve 1950).

As Karve remarks, many of the incest-tales (like the Jain one above) are told as illustrations of the sinfulness of all wordly relations or as conundrums and guessing games—not as deeply tragic tales. In a variant from Salsette, the girl is foretold that she will marry a lowcaste man and later marry her own son. When the prophecies come true, she is disgusted by the former but accepts the latter as her fate (D'Penha, 45). How different in ethos from the Greek Oedipus!

It should be noted here that this story is told invariably by women and to girls. The protagonists of the story are women; the men are pawns in the story of women's fate. Karve's Maratha woman heard it from her old sister-in-law when she was about fifteen and told it to Karve's daughter. All my Kannaḍa variants were collected from older motherly women.

We may now summarise the variations in the form of an archetype or composite tale. As this type of Oedipus tale has not been clearly identified so far, we may suggest a number like 931B (Indic?).

(*i*) *The prophecy*. An astrologer or a divine parent (Brahma, Vidhiyamma/Mother Fate, or Seṭivitāyi) prophesies that a girl will marry her own son and beget a son by him. When the girl learns of it (usually at puberty), she flees home and (*a*) secludes herself in a forest, or (*b*) magically enters a tree, coming out only for food.

(*ii*) *The prophecy fulfilled*. (*a*) She eats (a_1) a mango from a tree, or (a_2) greens from a patch, where a king has urinated; or (*b*) drinks water from a pool where (b_1) a king has rinsed his mouth, or (b_2) a bull has urinated; or (*c*) wears a sari on which (c_1) a king has sat, or (c_2) spilt his seed. (*d*) She gets pregnant, and when she gives birth to a son, she (d_1) pounds the child's head with a rock and/or (d_2) leaves him on the hillside, or (d_3) sets him afloat in the river after wrapping him in a piece of her sari. (*e*) The boy is rescued by (e_1) fishermen, or (e_2) shepherds, and grows up. (*f*) Years later, unwittingly, (f_1) she goes to her son's house, or (f_2) the son comes hunting; or (*g*) the king's men try to cut down the tree in which she lives, and discover her. (*h*) Mother and son meet, marry, and she gives birth to a son.

(*iii*) (*a*) *The discovery* takes place (a_1) when she is delousing her husband (son) and sees scars, or (a_2) when she discovers her sari-piece, in which she had wrapped her first son and which is brought out (according to custom) for her newborn's naming ritual.

(*iv*) *The consequence*. (*a*) She sings a lullaby about the incestuous confusion of kin-relations (e.g., son is also grandson and husband's brother), and hangs herself; or (*b*) she accepts her fate and lives happily with her son/husband and offspring, (b_1) after being advised by a goddess.

Chief Motifs

A 463.1	The Fates
M 301	The prophets (astrologers)
M 344	Mother-son incest prophecy
M 370	Vain attempts to escape fulfilment of prophecy
M371	Exposure of child to avoid fulfilment of prophecy
S 331	Exposure of child in boat (floating chest)
S 141	Abandonment in forest
R 131.3.1	Shepherd rescues abandoned child
T 412	Mother-son incest
N 101	Inexorable fate
H 51	Recognition by scar

In an earlier version of this paper (1972), I compared the Greek Oedipus myth with the Kannaḍa Oedipus tale. A glance at the motifs is enough to show how close yet how different the two are. The Greek myth is central to that culture; it is the object of much literary elaboration and psychological discussion. In it the killing of the father, Laïus, is as important as the son marrying the mother. The story is told entirely from the point of view of the young male, the son: he is the accursed one, he is the one who tries to escape fate and fulfill it, he is the one who discovers the

truth about himself. The Kannada tale, told by village women, is not the source of tragic intensity nor the object of great literary elaboration. There is no Laïus-figure, and therefore no patricide, in any of the tellings. The tale, in its episodic sequence, is exactly the same as the Greek one but told entirely from the woman's, the mother's, point of view.

To structural analysis, we need to add *point of view*, before we can interpret a tale. One may ultimately decide that such reversals (male to female, son fated to marry mother instead of mother being fated to marry son, etc.) are structurally or psychoanalytically reducible to a single pattern. But the presence of such differences in point of view should be interpreted in the light of other parts of the cultures.

The great importance of sons to mothers in the politics of the Indian family (Kakar 1978, 57), the prolonged period of breast-feeding, the practice in many families of sons sleeping next to mothers almost until they are adolescent does make the mother-marries-son tale significant. It expresses a mother's desire and real temptation to cling to her son. Furthermore, Hindus believe that fathers are reborn as sons.[5] The rivalry between fathers and sons for the mother is because the mother loves her son and the father is left out. We shall see other aspects of this father-son rivalry in the next section. Here are a few more supporting examples of the closeness of mother and son, with the father left out.

There is a recurrent motif in folktales in south India and elsewhere (Motif J 21.2). A father returns from a long exile or journey and enters his bedroom to find a strange young man sleeping next to his wife. He draws his sword to kill them both, when either his waking wife or a remembered precept ('Don't act when angry') stays his hand. The young man is really his son grown to manhood during his long absence but still sleeping innocently in the same bed as his dear mother.

A rare example of mother-son relations in mythology is the Bengali legend about the goddess Durgā, whose intercourse with her son is watched and noisily interrupted by a peacock. Durgā gets angry with the peacock for being a peeping Tom and curses the bird with impotence and an ugly squeal for a voice. She relents later and allows peacocks to have offspring by means of their tears. One could also add the Potiphar's Wife motif (K 2111.1), of which we have many examples in India, e.g., the Tamil story of Kunalan (Type 706). A stepmother desires her stepson who rejects her advances. She accuses him of making improper advances to her and his father punishes him by blinding him. Blinding, here or in Oedipus, is a well-recognised symbol for castration.

Relations of Father and Son

The most striking difference between the Kannada tale and the Greek myth is the absence of the father and hence of patricide. There are very, very few stories of actual patricide in Hindu myth, literature and folklore. A few marginal instances were listed at the beginning of this essay: Arjuna killed by his son, Rāma killed by his sons, both in battle, both revived later. The most explicit instance I know is in the sixteenth-century Tamil text *Tiruviḷaiyāṭalpurāṇam*, cited by Hart (1980). A brahman sleeps with his willing mother again and again. Once his father interrupts him in the act, so he axes his father. From then on, his father's shadow-form sticks to him, interrupts with its cries all his daily activities and gives him no rest. His sin is expiated by the grace of Śiva and by the penance of rolling round the corridors of Śiva's temple. But such stories are rare or little known. Even here, as Goldman (1978, 370) points out,

> [the] expiation involves the reconstruction of the lost family, the original oedipal triangle, which occurs through the sinner's being adopted by Śiva and his wife. The wretch is saved only when he can accept the status of a submissive and devoted son to his divine parents.

But another pattern is very common: the aggression of the father towards the son. In all these stories the son willingly gives up (often transfers) his political and sexual potency. In the epic *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma, the first son of Śantanu, renounces both kingdom and his reproductive sexual life so that his father may marry a fishergirl and continue his (father's) sexual/reproductive life. Bhīṣma, lifelong celibate, lives on to become the most revered old man of the epic, warrior and wise man.

Yayātī, a king cursed by a sage to suffer senility, wishes to prolong his life of pleasure and asks his five sons to transfer their youth to him. The elder sons refuse and earn his curses. The youngest son exchanges his youth for Yayātī's age for a thousand years. For his sacrifice, this son receives great honour, and inherits the whole kingdom later.

A more explicit instance of a father's aggressive rivalry towards a son is the following. The sage Bṛhaspati desires his elder brother's wife, Mamatā. She protests that she is pregnant, and that the embryo in her womb, which already knows the Vedas, will not allow his seed to grow in her womb; he should therefore wait till she has delivered. Nevertheless he insists, but the embryo cries out and prevents him from fulfilling his desire. Bṛhaspati therefore curses the embryo with blindness. The child is called Dīrghatamas, deep darkness.

This story opens with the positive Oedipal pattern: a younger man desires an older woman (an elder brother's wife is equal to a mother), and the embryo in the womb resists the father-figure. But it ends with the latter striking the embryo with blindness. It is significant that the Dīrghatamas story is told by Bhiṣma, and in the *Rāmāyaṇa* the Yayātī story is told by Rāma when he is exiled by his aged father. Such replication and reminiscence, such evocations of precedent at a crucially parallel moment by a character participating in the very patterns set by the precedent—these are part of literary technique as well as evidence for a major cultural 'imprinting' of themes.

Many more instances may be cited of the father-son conflict with the father as victorious aggressor. I shall add only one more: the story of Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed god. Pārvatī went to bathe, and stationed Gaṇeśa, her son, at the door, telling him to let nobody in. (In the *Śiva Purāṇa*, the scene is set in the bedchamber.) Her husband Śiva wanted to enter; and when Gaṇeśa tried to stop him, Śiva cut off his head, which was later replaced by an elephant's head. In some legends, Gaṇeśa already had an elephant-head, and Śiva broke off one tusk (as seen in the iconography). The Freudian implications of the father beheading the son or breaking off his tusk are obvious.

Goldman (1978) takes issue with my point regarding the 'reverse Oedipus' in India. He enlarges on some of my examples (and adds several more) with great erudition, makes several acceptable corrections (which I have incorporated here), and points to an important displacement of the 'positive' Oedipal theme: the rivalry between brahmans and kśatriya kings. The most famous of these conflicts is that of sage Vasiṣtha and king Viśvāmitra, over the former's all-nurturing cow ('India's eternal mother symbol'; Goldman 1978, 353). The triangle is: aged brahman (father), covetous king (son) and cow (mother). Helped by the cow's magical powers which create whole armies of outcasts, Vasiṣtha destroys Viśvāmitra's forces and his hundred sons. Viśvāmitra, dejected by defeat, acquires terrible weapons by penance, and returns to destroy Vasiṣtha's hermitage. Vasiṣtha's staff absorbs all of Viśvāmitra's weapons. In a final show of rage, Vasiṣtha 'assumes a dreadful form with flames shooting from the pores of his body, a veritable nightmare fantasy of paternal rage'. Fearful of the destruction of the whole world, the hosts of sages, a sort of chorus representing collectively the voice of the paternal conscience or superego, begs Vasiṣtha to calm himself. The sage is appeased. Viśvāmitra 'realizes the incomparable potency of the paternal phallus as symbolized by the upraised staff of the aged brahman. He resolves to acquire this same potency himself. . . . [through painful austerities] he attains the status of a brahman in one lifetime. . . . Vasiṣtha relents and befriends his old rival, according him the paternal blessing [by addressing him as a brahman sage].' In the end Viśvāmitra does homage to Vasiṣtha (Goldman 1978, 351–4).

The Kannada temple legend of Piriyāpaṭṭaṇa also expresses the brahman/king Oedipal conflict in symbolic ways too obvious to need comment.

> A brahman gives a king a sacred pot for safekeeping. The king's servants discover that the water in the pot turns iron into gold. The king covets the pot, kills the brahman when he returns. But the betrayed brahman becomes a demon and torments him by attaching himself to him. The brahman demon leaves him only when he enters a Śiva temple but swoops on him again when he comes out of it. The mother goddess (Urimasaṇi) at the Vaidyeśvara temple saves him by letting the king through one of the temple's three doors and letting him out unexpectedly through another. (Rajashekhara 1980)

Note the meaningful motifs of coveting the father-figure's pot, the tormenting guilt that follows him everywhere, and release through a mother-figure (with three doors to the temple) in a fatherly god's abode. The Oedipal conflict is most explicit in such brahman-king relations as well as in *guru*-disciple relations. (For a fuller exposition, see Goldman 1978.)

Though there is no clear word for 'incest' in Indian languages, as Nicholas (1978, 14–15) points out, there are a series of words for the crime of 'sexual intercourse in the bed of the *guru*' (*gurutalpābhigamana*). This offense is included in their codes by Manu (IX.235) and other *Dharmaśāstra* writers among 'great sins' (*mahāpataka*), along with brahmanicide. The foremost meaning of *guru*, however, is 'father' in Manu (II.142); also 'preceptor', any senior or 'weighty' person. Thus one sees that the Hindu writers are quite aware of transferences and generalisations of an 'object-cathexis'. To their definition of this incestuous sin of intercourse with a *guru*'s wife, they add a list of other sins 'of the same form' (*tādrūpya*) or 'equal' (*sāmya*). Nicholas (1978, 16) continues and cites the longest of such enumerations from the *Nāradasmṛti*.

> If a man has sexual intercourse with any of these women, viz., mother, mother's sister, mother-in-law, a wife of a paternal uncle or a friend or a pupil, a sister, a sister's friend, daughter-in-law, the wife of one's Vedic teacher, a woman of the same *gotra* (clan), one who has come for protection, a queen, an ascetic woman, one's wet-nurse, a woman performing a *vrata* (vow) and a *brāhmaṇa* woman, he becomes guilty of the sin of the violator of the *guru*'s bed (i.e., incest). For that crime no other punishment is laid down except that of cutting off the penis.

In all these cases, we must note that the son never wins, almost never kills the father-figure. Where a younger man kills the older, as when

Arjuna kills Bhiṣma, it is clear that it is the latter who teaches him a way of doing so. The power of the father-figure is never overthrown. The only counter-instance, and it is a very important one, is that of Kṛṣṇa killing Kaṃsa, his demonic uncle who has tried to destroy him in many ways ever since he was born. Kṛṣṇa also incites Arjuna to kill in war all his father-figures, especially Bhiṣma. Here, too, one must note that Kṛṣṇa is a god, supreme in power, and invulnerable—unlike all the son-figures. As Goldman concedes, the pattern of the aggressive father and submissive son (who by submission becomes a hero, and attains power and honour in later life, as Bhiṣma does) is 'without doubt representative of an Oedipal type that the culture strongly favors'; such figures as Bhiṣma and Rāma, ideal sons, 'do constitute the ego-ideal for Hindu men' (Goldman 1978, 364).

Relations of Father and Daughter

The most ancient myths bear witness to a father's desire for his daughter. We shall cite here only two. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.7.41–4) has the following. Prajāpati, the father of the gods, the creator, cast his eyes upon his own daughter, desiring 'May I pair with her'. So saying, he had intercourse with her. This was a crime in the eyes of the gods, who said, 'He is guilty who acts thus to his own daughter, our sister: pierce him through'. Rudra aimed at him and pierced him. Half of his seed fell to the ground.

In later times Prajapati is called Brahma, the Grandfather. A new version of the above, 'positive Oedipus' story appears in the *Matsya Purāṇa* III, 30–4. When Brahma began his work of creation, the goddess Gāyatrī appeared in the form of a girl from one half of Brahma's body, who mistakenly took her for his daughter. Seeing that form of exquisite beauty, he was fired with love. . . . The sons of Brahma, taking Gāyatrī for their sister, expressed indignation and contempt. . . . Gāyatrī began to circumambulate him in reverence . . . he felt shy of turning his head in her direction, as his sons were close by. He therefore created four heads, each facing one of the directions, so that he might see her undisturbed. Seeing Brahma in this state, Gāyatrī went to heaven, and as she journeyed upward, Brahma put a fifth head on top. . . . After this Brahma lost the powers that he had acquired by asceticism. (For more instances, see O'Flaherty 1975, 26, 29–31, 34–5, 117–31, and the Bengali examples in Nicholas 1978.)

In the Kannada *Vaḍḍhārādhane* (a Jain work, about ninth century), a king falls in love with his youngest daughter, and asks his wives and counsellors, 'If there is a lovely thing born in my kingdom, to whom does it belong?' They say, 'Of course, the best horses, elephants, pearls, precious stones and the loveliest women in a kingdom belong to the king.' Then he asks the sages the same question, who (being sages) answer, 'You'll have to tell us what particular thing you are thinking of. Then we can tell you what belongs to whom and what doesn't.' The king gets angry and drives them out for dissenting and asking inconvenient questions. Then he marries his youngest daughter. She bears him children. Her son Kārtika goes for some sort of boys' picnic in the woods where all the rest of the boys get (apparently according to custom) food, flowers and clothes from their families, especially from grandparents. When Kārtika doesn't receive anything from his grandparents, he comes home and asks his mother, 'Mother, where is your father, my grandfather? Do I have one or not?' She tells him in grief, 'What shall I tell you, my son? Your father is also my father.' As soon as he hears it, Kārtika is shocked and finds it reason enough to renounce the world and become a wandering ascetic.

Note here, as in the Oedipus stories, the emphasis placed on the resulting confusion of normal kin-relations, especially the conflation of generations (grandfather-father-son-brother) resulting from incestuous relations—and the son's horror at such a discovery.

A Tamil tale has a similar father-daughter pattern, but here the father doesn't get the daughters. A king has no children. He prays to Śiva, who appears to him and tells him, 'You have a choice. You can either choose one ordinary son or four beautiful talented daughters.' The king chooses the daughters (note the preference!). They do grow up to be four talented, divinely beautiful young women. One day the daughters are watching from the balcony while a clumsy tone-deaf masseur is patting oil into the king's body with all the wrong rhythms. The daughters are disgusted with the unmusical performance, come down from the balcony, dismiss the lout, and proceed to give the delighted father an oil-bath, all four of them massaging and patting oil into his limbs in pleasing rhythms, conducting a very orchestra of touch. After the bath, which sends the king into an ecstasy of pleasure, he is filled with desire for them and goes into the dark room specially reserved in ancient Indian palaces for doldrums, tantrums and sulks. When the family and the counsellors gather to ask him why he is sullen and unhappy, he asks a question similar to the one in the Kannaḍa Jain legend: 'If I have something precious, should I enjoy it myself or give it away?' The unsuspecting ministers tell him, 'Go ahead. Enjoy what you have.' Delighted, he answers, 'I'm in love with my daughters. I want to marry them right away. Make the necessary arrangements.' The

ministers think he is mad, but humour him by saying that they would take care of it. Then they rush to the daughters with the bad news; the resourceful daughters pray to the goddess Pārvatī, who transports them into a sealed lacquer palace in the heart of a jungle—a seven-storied palace, with living quarters on the first, and food and clothing of every kind stored up in the six upper stories to last several years. The palace has no doors or windows: a good image for virginity, indeed. Several years later, a prince strays into the jungle and hears strange *vīṇā* (lute) music which lures him to the sealed palace, and it opens miraculously to let him in. He falls in love with all four of them and marries them. The young women's virginity was offered only to the rightful young man, after being denied to the incestuous father (Sastri 1968).

In a Kannaḍa folk-*Rāmāyaṇa*, we see one more transformation of the Oedipus pattern:

Rāvaṇa brings his barren wife a magic mango, a boon from Śiva. On his way back, he is hungry and so eats the fruit and becomes pregnant himself. His nine days are equal to nine months and he sneezes nine times, and a daughter is born. He casts the child as inauspicious in the Ganges. Later he is infatuated with her, tries to marry her, and fails in the marriage-test. Rāma wins and marries her. Later Rāvaṇa abducts her. Rāma kills him with the help of Rāvaṇa's wife, and rescues Sītā. (Rāgau *et al.* 1973, 150)

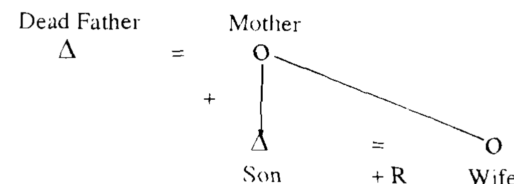
The interesting features of this pregnant-father motif (found elsewhere in India, too) are: (*a*) the envy of female fertility/potency, or womb-envy; (*b*) the way the father bypasses a mother to beget a daughter so that there is no father/mother/daughter triangle; and (*c*) the way he tries to marry his daughter, thereby trying to be his own son-in-law.

These tales clearly express a common Indian folktale theme, the sexual assault of the young woman by older non-marriageable kin—here a father, in many tales an elder brother—and non-kin (e.g., a lecherous ascetic or *guru*). Dozens of tales open with the flight of the daughter from the lecherous father-figure. The young woman's character and chastity are tested by such incestuous and adulterous assaults (e.g., the Kannaḍa tale of Hanchi, in Ramanujan 1982 and Chapter 20 above); she withstands them till she meets her legitimate husband. As noted earlier, father, elder brother and *guru* are equivalent. As we well know, and as the Oedipus tales point out, kinship organisation and the social order based on it depend on the distinction between sisters (or mothers) and wives, fathers (or brothers) and husbands.

The famous epic instances of Sītā's abduction, and Draupadī's disrobing in a public place by her older in-laws, the many tales where ascetic father-figures or elder brothers desire the young woman, are all instances of this basic pattern. Such and other chastity-ordeals for the young woman parallel the long exile, symbolic castration or heroic ordeals of the young male heir, usually required by the father. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the elder two sons Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa go to the forest for fourteen years to fulfil their father's promise to his youngest wife. They divest themselves of all royal powers and privileges and don ascetic bark-garments. In the forest Rāma's wife, Sītā, is abducted by Rāvaṇa who arrives in the guise of a venerable sage.

Relations of Mother and Daughter

I have not yet found striking and explicit tales of a mother's rivalry with her own daughter, but one could cite numerous tales of stepmothers tormenting or exiling their stepdaughters, and cruel mothers-in-law trying to kill or harm daughters-in-law. Demonic mother-goddesses, ogresses, stepmothers and mothers-in-law are mother-figures specialising in the terrible aspects of mothers towards daughters; the evidence in the tales is not as neat as in the above three dyads (father-son, mother-son, father-daughter): these cruel mother-figures never win in the folktales. In Tamil, in-law tales are told from both the younger and the older woman's point of view. There are two kinds of mother-in-law tales: (*a*) the cruel mother-in-law, and (*b*) the mother-in-law as victim. Certainly the conflict between mother and daughter-figures is very much in evidence in these tales. Mother-in-law tales, like all Oedipal tales, exhibit a rivalry and conflict over a loved one; here the rivalry is between an older and a younger woman vying for the support and attention of the same man (who is, here, both son to the mother and husband to the daughter-in-law). It is significant that in all these mother-in-law tales the father is rarely in evidence.

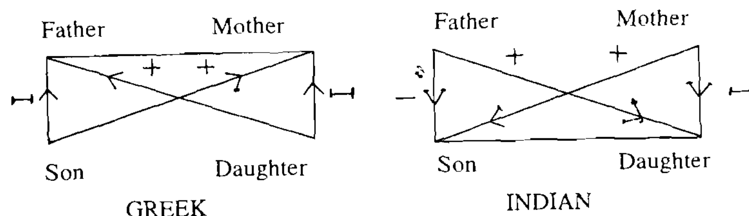


The rivalry between the barren elder queen-mothers and the youngest queen who becomes pregnant is blatantly for sexual success with the king (Type 707, found plentifullly all over India). It also approximates a

mother-daughter rivalry, with the older mother-figure vilifying and exiling the younger woman who is finally vindicated.

GENERALISATION

If we consider the above four relationships, we see that the Indian and the Greek tales, where they differ, do not differ in the basic pattern: (*a*) like sexes repel, and (*b*) unlike sexes attract, across generations. But they do differ in the *direction* of aggression or desire. Instead of sons desiring mothers and overcoming fathers (e.g., Oedipus) and daughters loving fathers and hating mothers (e.g., Electra), most often we have fathers (or father-figures) suppressing sons and desiring daughters, and mothers desiring sons and ill-treating or exiling daughters or daughter-figures. The structure or matrix of relations and actors is the same, but the *direction* is in reverse.



Furthermore, if the Greek (western) son wishes to (or actually does) supplant the father, we find in many tales that the Indian father wishes to supplant his son-in-law by marrying his own daughter. Similarly, the mother wishes to supplant her daughter-in-law by marrying her own son; the western Electras wish to get rid of mothers and take their place. There are no Laïus-figures killed in the Indian tales where mother marries son. There are no fathers in the mother-in-law tales either, where the mother competes with the son's wife; and no mother in the father-daughter tales. The prize sought is not the older cross-sex member of the triangle but the younger.

SPECULATIONS

I have a few observations and some questions. The Indian Oedipus pattern, especially in the father-daughter stories, is closer to the 'screen memories', 'seduction memories' that Freud describes in his Letter 69 to Fliess in 1897. 'In my analyses, I find it's the closest relatives, fathers or brothers, who are guilty men,' he says on 28April 1897. Within a few months he changed his mind: 'I no longer believe in my neurotica,' or seduction theory. In every case, 'the blame was laid on perverse acts by the father' (21 September 1897). Though he was torn over this theory, by 1905, when the Dora case was published, he had decided that such stories were projections of a daughter's sexual drive towards the father. A memory of a parental seduction is only a defensive reversal of the child's own wish to possess the parent. There has been much heated debate on the reasons for Freud's changes of mind—the debate even made newspaper headlines in *The New York Times* on Tuesday, 25 August 1981. (For an earlier scholarly discussion of this important matter, see Ricoeur 1972, 188–9 and elsewhere.)

Why do the Indian tales cited here present the reverse, defensive, 'negative' Oedipus-type? And the Greek Oedipus the 'positive' (son-marries-mother, etc.) type? Is there a correlation to other aspects of the two cultures? Even if we think of the two types as transformations of each other, we still need an explanation (cultural, psychological or other) for the predominance of one sub-type or another.

The problem of psychoanalytic universals is a difficult and important one. Is the Oedipus complex universal? Does it take the same form regardless of culture? People in all cultures have fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. But the relations between them are not culture-free. Kinship patterns, property laws, the dominance of male or female in power, lineage or residence, attitudes to old age or childhood, and more, are all influential in deciding psychological patterns. While inter-generational competition (the phrase is from Kluckhohn 1959) seems universal, the direction of aggression and desire, and the outcome, seem different in different cultures. We may explain away the Indian pattern as only a projection, a reversal, a transformation of the Greek one; or assert that Indian tales manifest a cultural repression (if one may speak of such) so deep that the killing of the father is entirely absent; or insist that the child projects its own desires (to rival, exile or kill the father, and to marry his own mother) on to his or her father or mother, as Freud found in his patients' 'screen-memories'. If that is the case, we still need to ask why it is that Indian tales are more like 'screen-memories' and the Greek one is so straightforward. Does this kind of pattern affect or reflect patterns of neurosis, repression, child-rearing, patterns of emotional development, social institutions? There is, for instance, less repression of 'the wish to be female' than in Western literature and religion: Indian poetry and Indian saints' lives are full of female identifications, transvestite imagery, etc. (Sinha 1966, 430; Ramanujan 1976). One is often struck by

the impression that Indian males repress their 'independence' as American males repress their 'dependence'. So the predominant kinds of neuroses may be quite different in the two cultures, and may need different emphases in therapy.

Indian conceptions of heroes and heroism are also quite different from the Greek or other European notions. Freud says, 'A hero is someone who has had the courage to rebel against his father and has in the end victoriously overcome him' (Freud 1937, 12). The modern Western quest is individuation, achieved through an overthrow of the father, whereas the Indian hero's quest is to fulfill his father, his family. Recent psychoanalysts have spoken of a Familial Self in the Indian personality (Roland 980). This medieval Kannaḍa poem says it well:

> Don't make me hear all day
> 'Whose man, whose man, whose man is this?'
>
> Let me hear, 'This man is mine, mine,
> this man is mine.'
>
> O lord of the meeting rivers,
> make me feel I'm a son
> of the house.
>
> Basavaṇṇa 62 (Ramanujan 1973, 70)

Furthermore, *both patterns exist in both cultures*, but different cultures emphasise different patterns through their *favourite* tales and psychologies. A traditional culture needs to use and absorb the vitality of the young, as Śantanu had to use Bhiṣma's, Yayātī his son's. An innovative culture needs to overthrow its parents. If Indian family patterns change in their basic ways, its Oedipus tales may acquire new endings.

It is also clear both from the examples in this paper, and from a second look at Oedipus and Hamlet, that both kinds of Oedipal patterns—e.g., son overthrowing or killing father and father taking son's powers or life—are present often in the same stories. Bhiṣma willingly sacrifices his political and sexual potency to his father; but he also fights his guru Paraśurāma, and is later killed by his grandnephew Arjuna (as Goldman points out). But what the Hindus remember, idealise, and retell over and over is the story of Bhiṣma's sacrifice (and other such stories).

In the Greek myth the father Laïus is not innocent. He tries to mutilate and destroy infant Oedipus; he also assaults a younger man, Chrysippus, homoesexually, and was therefore cursed to beget a son who would kill him and marry his own mother. But the celebrated story (especially seen

through Sophocles' eyes earlier, and through Freud's later) is only that of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother. 'Laïus and Oedipus both have an Oedipus complex,' wrote Geza Roheim (Friedman and Jones 1963, 72). After writing the above, I discovered George Devereux, 'Why Oedipus Killed Laïus: A note on the complementary Oedipus complex in Greek drama' (1953). He speaks of the general neglect in psychoanalytic theory of the Laïus complex and the Jocasta complex—two patterns that are greatly highlighted by the Indian tales. Such complementary patterns, Devereux suggests, are 'scotomised' because the adult (at this time) needs to 'place all responsibility for the Oedipus complex upon the child and to ignore, whenever possible, certain parental attitudes which actually stimulate the infant's oedipal tendencies':

> The concept of the Laïus and Jocasta complexes was even more egosyntonic and culturally objectionable than was the theory of the Oedipus complex, which, in a sense, merely confirmed the nineteenth-century adult's low opinion of children in general. (Devereux 1953, 132)

I refer the reader to his excellent discussion of Laïus the father. As for father-daughter relations, the Indian pattern is also clearly seen in the Lear-story (Dundes 1980). Though others in the western tradition have recognised it earlier, it is only in this decade that psychoanalysts are openly admitting to it (e.g., Ferenczi in 1932). As Karl Menninger says,

> Seventy-five per cent of the girls we accept at the Villages have been molested in tender childhood by an adult. And that's today in Kansas! I don't think Vienna in 1900 was any less sophisticated. (Quoted in *The New York Times*, 25 August 1981)

Witness also the recent interest in incest studies with titles like *Father's Days* (Brady 1979). *Books in Print 1981–82* lists 14 such titles. The mythology of a culture contains many patterns; the culture of a time and place chooses only some for literary, even psychoanalytic, elaboration.

CONCLUSION

Patterns similar to the favoured Indian one appear elsewhere in world mythology and folklore. In the inter-generation competition of parent and child, the outcome depends of course on family and other cultural patterns. In the Irish Cuchulain myth and in the Iranian epic about Sohrab and Rustum, fathers kill sons (for several Iranian examples, see Baraheni 1977, 64–70). Italian courtship practices and father-daughter relations as reported by Anne Parsons also show a partial 'Indian'-like pattern.

Other cultural patterns in India seem to corroborate the mythic and folk materials. A common Indian scandal-type (a new genre for folklorists) is that of the father getting his idiot or near-idiot son married to a young woman who becomes the old man's mistress. Nicholas 1979, reports similar stories from Bengali gossip. In the long history of India, there have been Hindu and Muslim dynasties. In Hindu history no major instance (to my lay mind) seems to be recorded where a son overthrows or assassinates his father and usurps the throne. (Is this unconscious taboo so great that Hindu historians have repressed any such instances?) But in Muslim (Mughal and pre-Mughal) history, fathers or elder brothers are regularly imprisoned or assassinated by son or brother—it is almost a *rite de passage*, a ritual of succession. Some writers point to the rule of the elders in India, the general pattern of political gerontocracy, and even the long tolerance of foreign rule (noted by Spratt) as patterns that are too tempting to pass by. There are no Prometheus or Cronos figures overthrowing or defying the elder gods in Indian mythology. Would these patterns change and other patterns emerge (or be recognised) with changes in Indian family, child-rearing, economy and politics? I have no clear answer.

Furthermore, it is significant that Freud (with his overwhelming emphasis on the Greek 'positive' Oedipus-pattern) has received little attention or recognition till recently in Indian psychological circles, which probably did not recognise his type of Oedipus-pattern as theirs at all.

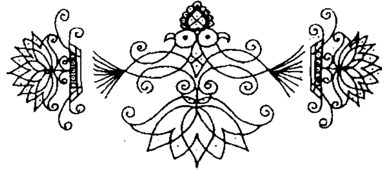
Lastly, the patterns persist and resonate through the modern Dravidian literatures I know. I shall give only two examples. In a long allegorical poem with 'modernity' itself for its theme, a Kannaḍa poet, C. Kambār, adapts a folktale of his region. A village chief, the hero's father, is killed by a tiger-demon who returns to the village in the shape of the chief himself. The demon-father impregnates the hero's mother and, speaking from her womb, sends the hero out for impossible quests like tiger's milk, etc., to satisfy her pregnancy longings, till finally she asks him (or the demon, through her) for his five senses. At the end of the poem, the young heir is blind, deaf, and mute, unable to reach out for the elixir that would make him whole. Shankara Kurup's moving celebrated Malayalam poem 'The Master Carpenter', speaks of the bitter rivalry of a father and the young talented son; the poem ends with the father killing the son by 'accidentally' dropping a chisel on him from above, while the son is working below him on the same pavilion (George 1968). The ancient Yayātī story, where the father borrows the youth of his son, is a favourite

among modern dramatists in Kannaḍa. The persistent popularity of such themes in movie, novel, play and poem adds further weight to the dominant pattern presented here.

The next thing to do is to talk to a psychoanalyst who knows the Indic area, armed with a (Buddhist) passage like the following:

> Finally, as the time of the human being's death approaches he sees a bright light, and being unaccustomed to it at the time of his death he is perplexed and confused. He sees all sorts of things such as are seen in dreams, because his mind is confused. He sees his (future) father and mother making love, and seeing them a thought arises in him. If he is going to be reborn as a man he sees himself making love with his mother and being hindered by his father; or if he is going to be reborn as a woman, he sees himself hindered by his mother. It is at that moment that the Intermediate Existence is destroyed and life and consciousness arise and causality begins once more to work. It is like an imprint made by a die; the die is destroyed, but the pattern has been imprinted. (Conze 1954, 283)

The Prince Who Married His Own Left Half



In 1962, Edward Dimock invited me to collaborate on a paper with him on a favourite subject of his, the Goddess of Snakes in Bengal. I was innocent of Bengali, but I'd been dabbling for a while in folktales, motifs and such. The enduring part of that paper is still Edward Dimock's textual analysis and synthesis of variants in the Manasa myth. Working with him on that paper raised questions that I'm still trying to answer. For instance, in folk narratives, what is the relation of one variant to another? When we 'synthesise' a composite text out of several 'variants', what is its status and use? When, as happens all too frequently in Indian tales, several 'types' get mixed together to form new texts, is the admixture random and promiscuous, or does it add up to a functioning unity, serving an artistic, meaningful whole?

In this essay, written to honour and celebrate a dear friend's many-sided work, I'd like to address his love of tales, and tell one that Kannada villagers tell. And I'd like to attempt answers to some of the above questions—not theoretically, but through the analysis of a tale, its 'archetype', the 'mixture of types', the 'variants', and how they mean what they mean.

Here is the tale, collected in Ghodageri, Belgaum District, Karnataka, in 1968.

THE PRINCE WHO MARRIED HIS LEFT HALF

The king had a son. When the prince came of age, the king wished him to get married. But the young man didn't want to get married: he listened to no one's advice, not even to the elders'. His father became rather desperate and threatened to hang himself if the prince didn't get married. The son then yielded and said, 'All right. Split my body in two, bury my left half in flowers. A woman will be born out of it. I'll marry her. I won't marry anyone else.'

The king was terrified that his son would die in the operation, when they were cutting him in half. He asked the prince, 'Is there no other way, a simpler way?'

The Prince said, 'There's no other way. Other women are uncontrollable. It's hard to keep them in line.'

The king finally agreed. An expert cleaved the prince's body into two halves, and buried the left half in flowers. In a few days, a lovely woman came out of the flowers. The right half grew whole and it was as if the prince had never been cut in half. The king got her married to his son according to the proper rites.

The prince had a wonderful palace built in a deserted place outside town for his wife, and visited her there. The king also was very fond of his daughter-in-law. He too would visit her now and then, and see that everything was right for her.

One day a wizard came to that place. On his way to some far-off country, he saw this wonderful palace in a deserted area and he started walking around it. The king's daughter-in-law, who was standing at her window, saw him and smiled at him.

The wizard took shelter in an old woman's house in the nearby village. The old woman used to make garlands for the king's daughter-in-law every day. The wizard made a fantastic garland one day, gave it to the old woman, and said, 'Take this to the king's daughter-in-law and tell me what she says.'

The old woman took the garland to the king's daughter-in-law, who opened it and got the message. Though she felt happy inside, she pretended to be angry; she pressed her hand in vermilion and slapped the old woman's cheek. The old woman came home weeping and showed the man her cheek. He consoled her by saying, 'Don't worry about it. It's nothing. She just wants to let me know that she is having her period.'

A few days later, he made another garland for the palace, and gave it to the old woman. This time, when she received the garland, the king's daughter-in-law dipped her hand in white lime and slapped the old woman's breasts. The old woman came home weeping. When the man saw the white marks, he said, 'Don't worry. She wants to tell me that it's full-moon time.'

In a few days, he sent the palace a third garland. This time the king's daughter-in-law dipped her hand in black ink and hit the old woman on the backside. She came home crying and told him what had happened. The man said, 'You must read these things right, old woman. She wants me to go to the back of the palace on a dark new-moon night.'

When he went there on the dark new-moon night, a rope was hanging from the back window of the palace. He gripped it and hauled himself up, and went in through the window. The king's daughter-in-law was waiting for him; she was happy and they made love. She said to him tenderly, 'If you come in your natural shape, the guards at the gate will not let you in. So disguise yourself, and you can come here often.'

The young man said, 'That's easy,' and used to visit her in the guise of a snake. He would enter the palace through the drain-pipes; as soon as he came into her

room he would change into a man, and they would make love. Many days passed this way.

One day when the king came to see his daughter-in-law he saw a snake slithering in the drain-pipe. He at once called his servants and got it killed. He asked them to throw the dead snake outside the palace, and went to his daughter-in-law's chambers. When he said, 'You know, I saw a snake coming into the house. Your luck was good. I saw it, got it killed and thrown outside,' the daughter-in-law cried out, 'Ayyo! What a terrible thing!' and fainted.

When she came to, after much first aid, she was grief-stricken that her lover was caught and killed; but outwardly she pretended to be terrified of the snake, and her narrow escape. Before he left, the king tried to comfort her by saying, 'Why are you scared? The snake is really dead and gone.'

From that day on, she was in mourning; she gave up food and sleep. One day a *dāsayya*, a holy mendicant, came to her door asking for alms. She called him in and asked him a favour, 'Look here, *dāsayya*, I'll give you a rupee. It seems there's a dead snake lying outside. Will you go check if it's there?'

He went out, checked and found it there. She said to him, 'Go take the dead snake to a cemetery, cremate it and bring me the ashes. I'll give you two rupees for your trouble.'

The *dāsayya* agreed, took it to a cemetery, cremated it according to proper funeral rites, and brought her back the ashes. She gave him two rupees first, then added three more. 'Go now to a goldsmith and get a talisman,' she ordered.

The *dāsayya* went out again, and came back with a talisman.

She placed her dead lover's ash in the talisman and tied it around her shoulder. Mourning her dead lover's death all day, she grew thinner. The prince heard about her emaciated state and thought, 'My wife has some secret sorrow, I must go and console her. She's growing thinner each day.'

He came to the palace and asked her why she looked so thin and sick. He talked to her in any number of ways. He asked her to tell him whatever was happening. But she didn't part her lips once; she didn't tell him a thing. He made her sit on his lap and used all the arts he knew, and persuaded her. Finally she said, 'What else can I do? You've kept me here in a jail. I get to see your face here once on full-moon day, and once on new-moon day. How can my heart be happy and content?'

The king's son felt very contrite when he heard of her sorrow. 'Then I'll stay here all the time, every day,' he said to console her.

She then said, 'I'm going to tell you a riddle. If you answer it, I'll throw myself in the fire and die. If you can't answer it, you must throw yourself in the fire and die. If anyone asks afterwards why this happened, neither of us should tell them why. If you agree to these conditions, I'll tell you the riddle. Otherwise, let's quit.'

The crazy prince agreed. He placed his hand in hers and gave her his word. Then she said:

'One for seeing,
Two for burning,
Three for wearing on the shoulder—
A husband for the thigh,
A lover for the shoulder!
Tell me what it means.'

The prince struggled and groaned to get the answer to the riddle. He could not, for the life of him, find any answer; so, according to his word, he fell into a fire and killed himself. She took another lover and lived happily.

Anyone who hears it can see that such a tale works on several levels at once. The disciplines of literary criticism, anthropology and psychology, especially the different schools of psychoanalysis, will see different aspects of the tale as important. In the rest of the paper, I shall reconstruct a tale-type from its many tellings (a word I prefer to 'variants', which implies an underlying 'invariant'), and discuss its structure; compare it with another telling from an anthropological point of view; and comment briefly on a possible Indian view of 'narcissism', as embodied in tales like this one.

In addition to the telling I've translated above, ten others have been recorded. Nine of these are in Kannada. The tenth, in Suzanne Hanchett's recording, and four of the Kannada recordings have all three sections of the story:

(*I*) the self-division of the prince and the marriage to a woman born of his own body;
(*II*) the arrival of a magician/snake who becomes the wife's paramour; and
(*III*) the death of the snake, the riddle, and the consequences.

Five of the Kannada versions have only the second two parts. We may reconstruct an archetype, a composite of all the motifs in the ten versions, as follows.

(*i*) (*a*) A prince distrusts women, refuses to marry. (*b*) He agrees to marry only the woman who is born of his own left half, when it is cut and buried in flowers. (*c*) When he is cut in half, and placed in a box, one part becomes a male body, another a female. Or, (*c1*) the woman is born of a bowl of his blood, and (*d*) a drop of blood falls on the ground and becomes a snake, which appears later as the woman's paramour. (*e*) The princess is housed in a palace outside town.

(*ii*) (*a*) A magician comes to the palace and (*b*) woos the princess through a go-between, an old woman who makes garlands. (*c*) He reads the princess' three signs, meets her on a dark night, and becomes her lover. (*d*) He enters and leaves the palace as a snake.

(*iii*) (*a*) The father or (*a1*) the prince happens upon the snake-lover and kills him. (*b*) The princess pays (*c*) a holy man or (*c1*) some boys one coin to find the snake's remains, two coins to cremate it, three to make a talisman for her shoulder or neck, in which she wears her lover's ashes.

(*iv*) (*a*) She sets the prince a death-riddle, which summarises her love affair and her present situation, usually by the phrase, 'Lover on the shoulder, husband on the thigh'. If he cannot answer the riddle, he should throw himself into the fire; if he does, she would die. (*b*) He is unable to answer it and kills himself. She takes another lover and lives happily. Or, (*b1*) his sister learns about her brother's desperate wager, often through a dream, and comes to see him. On the way, she hears birds talk about her sister-in-law's riddle and his answer. With her help, he answers his wife's death-riddle, and the wife kills herself. And (*c*) He marries his sister's daughter.

A search through the motif indexes revealed that none of the striking motifs that open the story had been recorded (Thompson and Balys 1958; Thompson 1955). Some important motifs, however, appear in later parts: H 607.3, man sees princess who makes signs to him; H 611.2, he (or his friend) interprets them; H 805, riddle of the murdered lover; H 575, accidental discovery of answer to the riddle. I offer some additional numbers and descriptions as follows: A 1275.1, man creates his own wife from his own left half; A 1275.2, man creates his wife from a bowl of his own blood.

It may be worth dwelling a little on this motif-sequence before we go on with our tale. A 1275.1 is 'deity creates princess from prince's body and gives her to him'. Obviously Adam and Eve belong here. It is tempting to think of the parallel between the Adam-Eve-Serpent triad and the one here. Also relevant is the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.1–6) creation myth of the Primordial Person dividing himself into male and female to beget all living beings by successive couplings. In any larger study, such comparative material should be considered, chiefly to point up the remarkable differences among the three uses of the motif of sexual fission. For instance, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* myth begins with loneliness and its conquest by creating another out of oneself. It is a creation myth, not a cautionary tale like our folktale. It is about creativity, progeny, transformation ('life, liberty, and the happiness of pursuit'). I don't know

if the tellers of the folktale knew of the classical precedent. The folktale certainly reverses the outcomes: not creation, but destruction, not the overcoming of loneliness but a perpetuation of it; not procreation, but illicit affairs, betrayal and barrenness. The First Man could split himself in two without being a 'schizo', because he had no choice but fission and incest: pre-sexual reproduction appears as a precursor of the sexual. As we know, 'sex' means 'division', division of function, division of labour. After the division into sexes, there is no return to the original unity without regression and even self-destruction.

In the type indexes, one finds that the closest type to which we may assign the present tale is *851 Turandot: Princess sets riddle to her suitors to be answered on pain of death* (Thompson 1964; Thompson and Roberts 1960). So I suggest here a number and description (with the above reconstruction, which may be further refined, as more variants are found) to future folktale scholars and type-indexers: *851 Indic, The Prince Who Married His Own Left Half.*[1]

At any rate, this search for motifs and the construction of an archetype from the various tellings we have so far reveal some interesting features:

1. half the tellings do not have *I* at all;
2. none, except the one above, has *II*, the princess' sign language;
3. all the stories have *III*, the riddle;
4. where tales have both *I* and *III*, we have two subtypes: (*a*) where the prince cannot solve the riddle and kills himself, (*b*) where the prince solves it with the help of a sister, whereupon the wife dies, and the prince marries the sister's daughter.

I'd now like to consider the structure of variation in these tellings and what they tell us about the meanings of the tale. Stith Thompson expresses a commonly held view regarding Indian tales: 'The structure of the complicated tale is very loose, so that the plot is often very difficult to fit into the patterns determined by European analogues. Sometimes the story-teller seems to have a repertory consisting of merely single motifs which he strings together almost at will' (Thompson 1946, 16). If we take such a view, we need only list the above differences of individual tellers, and the vagaries of oral transmission. But if we take the view that differences in Indian and other tales are structured and motivated, unless otherwise proven, we must ask why only some things are 'changed', 'forgotten', and not others. When, in the fuller versions, certain motifs appear that are not in the others, one may ask, 'Why these?' One of the

uses of making a synthetic archetype is, I think, not so much to trace the history or geography of a tale's migrations (though that was why archetypes were first constructed), but to distinguish fuller, more richly articulated tellings from the others, and to ask questions of form and meaning. Even garbled and less articulate tellings contribute to our understanding of the fuller versions.

Now to return to our version, which is rather a detailed one, we may ask, 'What function does *II* have, with a full elaboration of the princess' secret language of signs?' If we look up the indexes, we find that our section *II* occurs in another independent tale and was striking enough for the type-makers to give it as the name for the whole tale-type: *516A, The Sign Language of the Princess*. It is an ancient story that has been reported in twenty versions all over India (and from nowhere else). The *Kathāsaritsāgara*, the classic collection of tales in Sanskrit, has the earliest version (see Tawney 1968, IV, 251–61). Here is a summary.

516A The Sign Language of the Princess

(*i*) The Friends. A prince and a youth of lower rank (vizier's son, etc.) are close friends. (*a*) The Old Woman as Trouble-Maker [M301.2.1, T12]; (this element appears sometimes as a separate tale). (*b*) For other false reasons the prince commands that his friend be executed. Compassionate executioner. Later, the friend appears to interpret signs. (*c*) The two friends are banished. (They break the villager's water pots, etc.) (*d*) The prince dreams of a princess [T11.3] and he and his friend search for her.

(*ii*) The Princess and her Sign Language. The prince sees a lovely princess who makes signs to him [H607.3]. The friend interprets them [H611.2]. (Example: the princess strikes her teeth with a rose [Z175.1, Z175.2], signifying that her father's name is Raja Tooth).

(*iii*) Winning the Princess [K1300]. They travel to the city where dwells the princess. (*a*) Through the help of an old woman (flower-seller, etc.) they gain access to the princess. (*b*) The prince, disguised as a girl, gains access to the princess [K1321.2]. (*c*) The princess tries to poison the friend, but fails. (*d*) The friend drugs the princess and brands her back. In the guise of a fakir he then tells the king he has driven a witch away from a human corpse, which the witch was eating, and has branded the back of the witch. The king, believing the princess to be a witch, drives her out and his friend carries her off. (*e*) The prince, disguised as a woman, is left in the care of the king by the friend. The prince then escapes. The friend returns and demands the 'woman'. The king is forced to give the princess instead. (*f*) Other means of winning the princess. (Thompson 1964, 185)

Note how the prince is unable to interpret signs, and needs a friend to help and protect him, though he is quite faithless towards his friend. Note also how the prince obtains his wife by first becoming a 'woman' himself.

In the fuller versions there are two older women, too: a trouble-maker who separates the friend and almost gets him killed, and later in the tale a helpful old woman who helps the prince get access to the princess. Note also how the princess tries to kill the friend, and later the friend accuses her of being a witch eating human corpses. The accusation is a ruse and patently false, but tells the truth about this female figure in a deeper symbolic sense.

Thus, *Tale 516A, The Sign Language of the Princess*, is full of signs that are read or not read at some risk to one's life. One doesn't have to be a Jungian to see that the whole tale is about the prince coming to terms with his wiser alter ego (friend), who alone can read the signs, befriend the Old Woman, identify the princess (or the feminine side) as a cannibal before she can be won; and he has to help the prince himself to 'become a woman' before he can relate to one. I would suggest further that the whole group of tales listed in the index under 516, 516A, and 516B have to do with related themes, but this is not the occasion to elaborate on their significance.

I think I've said enough to show that the presence of 516A in our tale is not random. The claim is strengthened by the fact that the prince begins by distrusting women, and can marry only his left half, which too he keeps at a distance—and that he cannot understand her or himself. The tale is making the important psychological point that our Prince Narcissus cannot read. Like many riddles, the princess' riddle tells the literal truth. All that the prince needed to do was to relate her words directly to herself and himself.

By contrast, the magician, a stranger, does just that and reads the signs of the princess by relating her signs to her body, her condition, the time of the month, the phases of the moon. The old woman is used as a foil, for she too cannot read: the slaps she receives on breast and buttock stun her understanding. So it is the magician who understands and wins the princess, gives her pleasure, makes her happy, earns her love and her mourning, as the prince never does. He also has an animal self, a snake who enters the house through the drain hole (how Freudian can you get?). But the prince, out of touch with women (significantly, there is no mother in the tale), out of touch with his own left half and his own woman, cannot read the riddle she sets him—a riddle which is both an act of cruelty and a cry for communication, in which she blatantly gives everything away, summarises his and her situation, flaunts her unfaithfulness, almost crying to be found out, to be understood. It offers him a second chance to know himself: both a death sentence and a possible new spell of life.

So section *II* (The Sign Language) of the story is intimately related

both to *I* (the prince's distrust of women) and to *III* (his inability to read his wife's riddle). Section *II* introduces other symmetries; for example, the magician befriends an old woman who makes garlands. After all, the princess herself was born of flowers, and responds to them.[2]

Once we see these themes, others become clear, too. These are brought into relief by the other subtype, which we mentioned above, where a sister solves the riddle and saves the prince's life. (I'm indebted to Suzanne Hanchett for allowing me to see and use her translation and analysis.) Here is a slightly adapted version of the tale Hanchett collected in 1977 in Gorur, Karnataka, from an Adi Karnataka woman.

There were five brothers, four of whom were married. The fifth brother would not accept any girl who was offered to him as a bride. So the parents and the other brothers told him to go find himself a bride, that they could not do any more for him.

He then made a knife and set off on a horse. He went along for a while until he got to a banyan tree. There he put a new clay vessel under the tree. And stabbing himself in the chest, he let some of his blood flow into the vessel. Covering the vessel with a pure, white cloth, he removed the knife from his body and put it down. A drop of blood dropped from it on to the earth. The drop of blood at once turned into a snake and crept away before he could see it. He took the vessel and left that place.

He then went into a forest and tried to hide the vessel somewhere. But as he set it down, it turned into a beautiful girl. After twelve years she came of age, and he married her right there in the forest. After the marriage, he built a house and left her there, saying, 'It has been twelve or thirteen years since I saw my people and my country. And I also want to go hunting.' He forbade her to go out of the house until he returned, as there was no one in the forest. He told her that even if a holy man or beggar should come to the door, she should not come out and give him alms. Then he left her.

Meanwhile the snake had made its way to the house in the forest. Wherever the man went, the snake would watch him but move in the opposite direction. As the man went away from the house, the snake approached it, and took the form of a young man. And as it left the house, it would become a snake again. So the young man and young woman began to see each other, and soon began to like each other, the way boys and girls like each other.

This had been happening for a while, when the husband returned. Now he would often see a snake leaving the house as he entered it. He became suspicious, wondering what was happening. This could be an enemy that might harm him. So one day, he took his knife and cut the snake into three pieces. He put the three pieces in a pile, one on top of the other, and went out.

After a while, a holy man came to the house begging for alms. The girl told him, 'I'll give you anything you want. Just tell me if you saw anything on the way.'

The holy man said, 'I only saw that somebody has killed a snake and cut it into three pieces.' She said to him, 'I'll give you money. Please get those pieces for me.' The holy man went and got them for her.

She then took the three pieces and made them into three charms by putting them in tube shaped amulets, which she hung from a single thread around her neck.

When her husband returned, she was lying on her cot. He asked her what was wrong with her and she said, 'I've a headache. I'm going to tell you a riddle. If you solve it, then my headache will go away.'

The riddle went as follows: 'With one coin, I got it. With two coins, I got it made. With three coins, I've put it round my neck.'

Then she said, 'If you solve the riddle, you win and I will jump into the fire. But if you do not solve it, you lose and you'll have to jump into the fire.'

He thought very hard but he could not solve it. The wife made a platform of firewood, and invited people from the seven surrounding villages to attend the cremation.

Now the man had an elder sister who had been given in marriage to one of the seven villages. On her way to the cremation, she happened to sit under the same old banyan tree. On the tree were two birds talking to each other. One said, 'It seems there was a fellow who felt that if they brought a girl from another family she might turn out to be a cheat or a woman of bad character. So he cut himself. . . .'

And the bird related the whole story to its mate, concluding with, 'Now he has to jump into the fire.'

The elder sister had now heard the riddle and could read what it meant. She hurried to the place and arrived just as the man was about to jump into the fire. She had written out the whole story on a sheet of paper and she handed it over to the village leader. They all read it, and the people decided that the man had been cheated. They made the wife jump into the fire instead of him. He married his sister's daughter and lived happily thereafter.

Notice how here, too, the young man accepts no one as his bride; he creates one out of his heart's blood. A crucial detail is added when the snake/lover is also born of his blood, though he knows nothing about it. He is cheated by his own unrelated and unacknowledged selves, his wife and her lover. When he kills the snake, she sets him the death-riddle which he cannot solve. As the woman who told the story said, 'The very blood from which he hoped to make a trustworthy girl of his own, that blood became his enemy' (Hanchett).

But his sister, who is a benign female figure, who can read signs and the language of birds, solves the riddle for him. The birds who reveal the secret are perched on the very same banyan tree where he had stabbed himself, and the birds also represent a couple who talk to each other.

Furthermore, as Hanchett points out, 'the elder sister's daughter is one of the preferred choices in this kinship system.' By marrying his sister's daughter, the man is back in family and society; through the sister, the people of the village are involved in his story. She, being married into another family, represents an outward branching, even a severance from the natal family. Such a sister is a specially appropriate dispeller of narcissistic spells. She is both family and not family, both blood-kin and in-law, knits the realms of kin and non-kin safely for bride and bridegroom. Thus, the story does dramatise 'the dilemma of exogamy and incest, the paradoxical need to use outsiders (wives) to produce insiders (children)'. One might add further, given the man's fear of outside women, and his near-fatal solution of marrying someone born of his own blood, this telling gives him a *via media*: by marrying his sister's daughter, he marries one who at one remove shares his blood and yet is a socially acceptable outsider—an unthreatening Other. Traditional Indian patterns of marriage take this dilemma into account. With their taboo on certain forms of endogamy (the extreme form of which is marrying oneself or one's daughter, etc.), combined with the taboo on caste exogamy as well, they balance the insider/outsider relations. A man cannot marry a sibling or certain close cousins, but can (in the Dravidian pattern) marry a sister's or paternal aunt's daughter. He/she cannot marry within a *gotra* or clan, but still has to marry within the caste or subcaste. The prince's story is an extreme enactment of the problem and the solution.

Another aspect of variation, the context of the telling, needs to be considered. The first telling is a domestic one; the tale is told within the house to children by an elder. The second, reported by Hanchett as a *vratakathā*, is a tale told as part of a woman's ritual during a Nāgapañcamī or Cobra Festival. The first feels free to explore the negative side of the problem and end it even with a death. The second offers a socially acceptable solution to the riddle, a marriage, a reunion of brother and sister, the presence of a whole community, and the creation of a new family. It does not dwell on the love affair and the sign language of the princess, as the domestic tale does—the latter genre seems freer to explore the unconscious, without the fears and favours of social pressure. The ritual tale itself is a public event, told during the Cobra Festival to propitiate snakes, to ensure safety and fertility within marriage. So it socialises the self-involved here.[3]

Thus, while different tellings or variants throw light on each other, each has an integrity of its own, and functions uniquely according to its genre and context. They are what one meets when one hears a tale. In collapsing them into Proppian functions or the Aarne-Thompson archetypes, we lose a great deal of information and significance. Motifs, functions, and archetypes are useful heuristic abstractions only when they help us return to the concrete tellings in which the culture carries its meanings. The so-called variant, what I've called a 'telling', is the true unit of folktale analysis.

I have, in passing, alluded to narcissism.[4] I shall content myself here with remarks on this theme. In all the tellings, and in other tales as well, the concern is with family continuity. Hindu conceptions of person and relationships of life and afterlife are a part of this cluster. Narcissism, interpreted in the Hindu sense, is not only the inability to love a contemporary other; it is also the turning away from ancestors and offspring, from one's place in the orderly sequence of generations; it is to refuse to be generative. Our first variant shows the dangers of suicidal self-involvement, the second the communal, familial solution. Of the four stages of life (celibate student, householder, forest-dweller, and world renouncer/*saṃnyāsī*), Manu and other thinkers valued most the stage of the householder. Though holy men and renouncer/*saṃnyāsīs* are respected, even revered, one detects in the literature a suspicion of them, an ambivalence toward them. They are suspected, and frequently convicted, of the charge of sterile self-love, of missing out on the natural cycle of life, which often comes back at them with a vengeance. As in the following example, a *saṃnyāsī* who had embraced celibacy prematurely has not cared enough for the fathers and forefathers who cannot reach heaven unless the family continues. An old etymology for *putra* or 'son' suggests that a son is one who saves the father from going to a hell specially reserved for those who do not have sons, a hell called *put*. The Hindu death anniversary ritual (*śrāddha*) performed by sons and descendants stresses the importance of offspring in keeping forefathers happy and out of hell. In the Hindu conception, the dependence of parents and children is mutual—self-love, the incapacity to love another, cuts deep into this mutuality.

The following classical story from the *Mahābhārata*, condensed from the translation by J.A.B. van Buitenen (1973, 103–10) is particularly apt in expressing the suspicion of self-absorption and guilt of holy men.

Jaratkāru the ascetic traversed the entire earth, abstaining from food, living off the wind, drying out his body day by day.

He saw his own forebears hanging in a cave with their faces down, hanging on to a single remaining strand of grass; and he saw a rat that lived in the cave

gnawing slowly through this string. They were bereft of food and emaciated and wretched in their cave; they suffered and yearned for deliverance. He spoke to them: 'Who are you? Seeing you upside down, fallen into this dire distress, I am seized with grief. How can I help? Ward off your downfall with a quarter, a half, even all my austerities? I am willing to do so.'

The ancestors said: 'Old man, you are magnanimous. Listen. We are the seers of strict vows, who have now fallen from heaven, because we are wanting in offspring. Our sacred austerities are lost, for we have no more thread. Yet there is one single thread left to us still, but it might well be lost: the one unfortunate son who remains to us unfortunates in our line is solely given to austerities. He is known as Jaratkāru, scholar of the Vedas, controlled, great-spirited, of massive mortifications. He is the one who out of greed for more austerities has brought us to this pass. He has no wife, or son, or any kin. . . . This string of grass from which you see us hanging, that is the string of our family from which our lineage grows. And the plant fibres that you see here, they are our threads, eaten away now by Time, good *brahman*. And this half-eaten fibre you see, we are hanging by it—and he, the last of our line, is practising austerities! The rat you see is mighty Time itself, *brahman*. And bite by bite he is killing off that foolish ascetic Jaratkāru. . . . See how we flounder in hell like sinners! And when we have sunk here with all our ancient ancestors, he too will be cut down by Time and shall travel to hell. Whether mortification, or sacrifice, or any other great purification, nothing equals offspring. When you see him, friend, tell the wretched Jaratkāru what you have witnessed, and tell him, 'Your wretched forebears are hanging face down in a cave. Take a wife as is proper, masterful man, and beget children!'

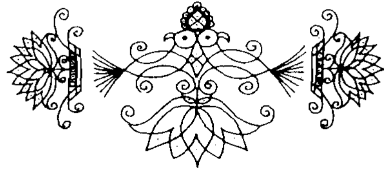
Hearing all this Jaratkāru became utterly miserable with grief, and told them who he was in a voice blurred by tears. 'It has always been the purpose of my life, O ancestors, to contain my seed and carry my body whole to the world hereafter. But now that I see you hanging like bats, my mind recoils from a life of celibacy, grandfathers.' Then he promised them that he would marry a wife but one who bears his own name and who will be given to him as alms by her own free will, and one he should not have to support.

He roams the world till the King of Snakes brings his sister to the hermit; the virgin's name is also Jaratkāru, and her brother undertakes to support her. Jaratkāru then marries Jaratkāru.

Finally, one may add that in India the study of psychology has been, by and large, philosophical, or part of the techniques of ecstasy and salvation, as in *yoga*. There is no major tradition of introspective personal psychology, as in later Europe, out of which, especially after the sixteenth century, the *Confessions* of Rousseau (or earlier, those of St Augustine), the self-portraits of Rembrandt, the novels of Richardson, and all their heirs, as well as the modern psychoanalytic schools have

arisen. But we may suggest that in tales like the above, probably even more than in myths, one finds a psychoanalysis-like exploration. Psyches are fearlessly probed and artistically presented to be experienced concretely rather than abstractly. Told as they are to children, much before the myths are told, such tales form, along with other child-rearing practices, the early bases for the Hindu Indian's aesthetics, ethos, and worldview.

A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale



In this short paper, I shall present a story about a woman, told by women in the Kannada-speaking areas of south India, hoping that you will hear even through my translation the voice of the woman-teller; then offer a reading of it for discussion, and suggest in passing certain characteristics of the genre of women-centred tales.

Indian folktales told around the house have usually animals, men, women and couples as central characters. There may be other secondary characters like supernatural beings, both divine and demonic, but they are not the focus of domestic oral tales. If the tales are comic, they invert and parody the values of the serious ones. In them kings, tigers, and demons, even gods and goddesses, could be figures of fun and act as morons as they do not in the serious ones. King and clown change places. Thus, the folktales of a culture have a number of contrastive genres that are in dialogue with each other. Each kind of tale has special characteristics, its own 'chronotope', if one wishes to invoke Bakhtin.

For instance, animal tales tend to be political: about how the powerless, the small, and the cunning sidestep or outwit the powerful. It is not surprising therefore that the *Pancatantra*, a book of tales meant to educate princes on the ways of the world, should consist mostly of animal tales. Where men are protagonists, especially in tales of quest, women are secondary: they are usually part of the prize, along with half a kingdom; sometimes they help the hero in his quest for the magic flower or do his derring-do (get the milk of a tigress, or whatever) and to slay the ogre, qualifying him to marry her and receive his half of the kingdom. These stories end in marriage—for they speak of the emancipation of the hero from the parental yoke and the setting up of a new family, as he comes into his own.

But in women-centred tales, the heroine is either already married or

she is married early in the tale, and then the woman's troubles begin. In a tale called 'The Crab Prince or The Fish Prince' (*edikumara, minakumara*), the young woman is often sold or married to a wild murderous animal bridegroom and the rest of the story tells you how she made him human, handsome and gentle. In another, she marries a man fated to die soon, as Savitri does in the classic tale, and vies with Yama the God of Death, tricks him into giving her husband a long life among other things. In 'The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll', he's already dead, predicted by astrologers to lie as a dead man till a good woman serves him for twelve years (or pulls out the thousands of needles from his body), after which he comes to life.

In such tales, not only is the pattern of the tale different (not easily accommodated by Propp's schemes, which work well for male-centred tales), but the same symbols that occur elsewhere may take on different meanings. For instance, a snake in a male-centred tale is usually something to be killed, a rival phallus, if you will. In women-centred tales, i.e., where women are the protagonists and also usually the tellers, snakes are lovers, husbands, uncles, donors and helpers.[1] Thus, the meaning of the elements, the interpretation of the symbolism, depends on what kind of tale it is: a snake in an animal tale, in a male-centred tale, and in a women-centred tale is not the same animal. Symbols, let alone being universal, do not even mean the same thing as you move from genre to genre. So the gender of the genre, if one may speak of such (and surely the gender of the teller, the listener, and the interpreter), becomes important in interpretation. A woman's culturally constructed life-forms, her meaning-universe, are different from a man's in such tales. This essay is meant to further the exploration of such a universe of women's discourse.[2]

Other kinds of women's tales counter various constructs and stereotypes (held by both men and women), such as the passive female victim, conceptions of *karma*, or even chastity. As I've spoken of them elsewhere, I'd like to talk today of a tale that speaks of a woman's creativity, her agency, and the way it is bound up with her capacity for speech. The rest of this paper will speak in some detail of one story, 'A Flowering Tree', collected in several versions in Karnataka, over the last twenty years by me and fellow-folklorists. Here is the story.

A FLOWERING TREE

In a certain town, the king had two daughters and a son. The older daughter was married.

In the same town, there lived an old woman with her two daughters. She did menial jobs to feed and clothe and bring up her children. When the girls reached puberty, the younger sister said one day, 'Sister, I've been thinking of something. It's hard on mother to work all day for our sakes. I want to help her. I will turn myself into a flowering tree. You can take the flowers and sell them for good money.'

Amazed, the older sister asked, 'How will you turn into a flowering tree?'

'I'll explain later. You first sweep and wash the entire house. Then take a bath, go to the well and bring two pitchers full of water,' said the younger sister.

The older sister listened to her carefully, swept and wiped and cleaned, took a bath, and brought two pitchers of water without touching them with her fingernails.

Right in front of their house stood a tall tree. The sister swept and wiped the ground under it too. Both girls then went there, and the younger one said, 'Sister, I'll sit under this tree and meditate. Then you pour the water from this pitcher all over my body. I'll turn into a flowering tree. Then you pluck as many flowers as you want, but do it without breaking a sprout or tearing a leaf. When you're done, pour the water from the other pitcher over me, and I'll become a person again.'

The younger sister sat down and thought of the Lord. The older one poured water from the first pitcher all over her sister. At once, her sister changed into a great big tree that seemed to stretch from earth to heaven. The older sister plucked the flowers carefully, without hurting a stalk, or sprout, or leaf. After she had enough to fill a basket or two, she emptied the second pitcher of water over the tree—and the tree became a human being again, and the younger sister stood in its place. She shook the water from her hair, and stood up. They both gathered the flowers in baskets and brought them home. The flowers had a wonderful fragrance. They wove them into garlands.

'Where shall I sell them?' asked the elder sister. 'Sister, why not take all of them to the king's palace? They will pay well. Mother is always doing such awful jobs for our sake. Let's pile up some money and surprise her,' said the younger one.

So the older sister took the basketful of garlands before the king's palace and hawked her wares, crying, 'Flowers, flowers, who wants flowers?'

The princess looked out and said, 'Mother, mother, the flowers smell wonderful. Buy me some.'

'All right, call the flower girl,' said the queen. They both looked at the

flowers, and they were lovely. The queen asked, 'How much do you want for these?'

'We are poor people, give us whatever you wish,' said the older sister. They gave her a handful of coins and bought all the garlands.

When the older sister came home with the money, the younger one said, 'Sister, sister, don't tell mother. Hide it. Don't tell anyone.'

They sold flowers like this for five days, and they had five handfuls of coins.

'Shall we show these to mother?' asked one.

'No, no, she'll get angry and beat us,' said the other. The two girls were eager to make money.

One day the king's son saw the flowers. They smelled wonderful. He had never seen such flowers anywhere. 'What flowers are these? Where do they grow, on what kind of tree? Who brings them to the palace?' he wondered. He watched the girl who brought the flowers; one day he followed her home to the old woman's house, but he couldn't find a single flowering tree anywhere. He was quite intrigued. On his way home he tired himself out thinking, 'Where on earth do they get such flowers?'

Early the next morning, while it was still dark, the king's son went and hid himself in the tall tree in front of the old woman's house. That day, too, the girls swept and washed the space under the tree. As usual, the younger girl became the flowering tree, and after the older one had gently plucked all the flowers, the tree became the young woman again. The prince saw all this happen before his very eyes.

He came straight home, and lay on his bed, face down. His father and mother came to find out what the matter was. He didn't speak a word. The minister's son, his friend, came and asked him, 'What happened? Did anyone say anything that hurt you? What do you want? You can tell me.'

Then the prince told him, bit by bit, about the girl turning into a flowering tree. 'Is that all?' said the minister's son, and reported it all to the king. The king called the minister, and sent for the old woman. She arrived, shaking with fear. She was dressed in old clothes and stood near the door. After much persuasion, she sat down. The king calmed her, and softly asked her, 'You have two girls at your place. Will you give us one?' The old woman's fear got worse. 'How does the king know about my daughters?' she thought. She found her voice with difficulty and stammered, 'All right, master. For a poor woman like me, giving a daughter is not as great a thing, is it, as your asking for one?'

The king at once offered her betel leaf and betel nut (*tambula*) ceremonially on a silver platter, as a symbolic offer of betrothal. She was afraid to touch it. But the king forced it on her and sent her home.

Back home, she picked up a broom and beat her daughters. She scolded them.

'You bitches, where have you been? The king is asking after you. Where did you go?'

The poor girls didn't understand what was happening. They stood there crying, '*Amma*, why are you beating us? Why are you scolding us?'

'Who else can I beat? Where did you go? How did the king hear about you?'

The old woman raged on. The terrified girls slowly confessed to what they had been doing—told her how the younger girl would turn into a flowering tree, how they would sell the flowers, and hoard the money, hoping to surprise their mother. They showed her their five handfuls of coins.

'How can you do such things, with an elder like me sitting in the house? What's all this talk about human beings becoming trees? Who's ever heard of it? Telling lies, too. Show me how you become a tree.'

She screamed and beat them some more. Finally, to pacify her, the younger sister had to demonstrate it all: she became a tree and then returned to her normal human self, right before her mother's eyes.

Next day, the king's men came to the old woman's house and asked her to appear before the king. The old woman went and said, 'Your Highness, what do you want of me?'

The king answered, 'Tell us when we should set the date for the wedding.'

'What can I say, your Highness? We'll do as you wish,' the old woman said, secretly glad by now.

The wedding arrangements began. The family made ritual designs on the wedding floor as large as the sky, and built a canopied ceremonial tent (*pandal*) as large as the earth. All the relatives arrived. At an auspicious moment, the girl who knew how to become a flowering tree was given in marriage to the prince.

After the nuptial ceremony, the families left the couple alone together in a separate house. But he was aloof, and so was she. Two nights passed. Let him talk to me, thought she. Let her begin, thought he. So both groom and bride were silent.

On the third night, the girl wondered, 'He hasn't uttered a word. why did he marry me?' She asked him, aloud, 'Is it for this bliss you married me?'

He answered roughly, 'I'll talk to you only if you do what I ask.'

'Won't I do as my husband bids me? Tell me what you want.'

'You know how to turn into a flowering tree, don't you? Let me see you do it. We can then sleep on flowers, and cover ourselves with them. That would be lovely,' he said.

'My lord, I'm not a demon, I'm not a goddess. I'm an ordinary mortal like everyone else. Can a human being ever become a tree?' she said very humbly.

'I don't like all this lying and cheating. I saw you the other day becoming a beautiful tree. I saw you with my own eyes. If you don't become a tree for me, for whom will you do that?' he chided her.

The bride wiped a tear from her eyes with the end of her sari, and said, 'Don't be angry with me. If you insist so much, I'll do as you say. Bring two pitchers of water.'

He brought them. She uttered chants over them. Meanwhile, he shut all the doors and all the windows. She said 'Remember, pluck all the flowers you want, but take care not to break a twig or tear a leaf.'

Then she instructed him on how and when to pour water, while she sat in the middle of the room, meditating on God. The prince poured one pitcherful of water over her. She turned into a flowering tree. The fragrance of the flowers filled the house. He plucked all the flowers he wanted, and then sprinkled water from the second pitcher all over the tree. It became his bride again. She shook her tresses and stood up smiling.

They spread the flowers, covered themselves with them, and went to bed. They did this again and again for several days. Every morning the couple threw out all the withered flowers from the window. The heap of flowers lay there like a hill.

The king's younger daughter saw the heap of withered flowers one day and said to the queen, 'Look mother, Brother and Sister-in-law wear and throw away a whole lot of flowers. The flowers they've thrown away are piled up like a hill. And they haven't given me even one.'

The queen consoled her: 'Don't be upset. We'll get them to give you some.'

One day the prince had gone out somewhere. Then the king's daughter (who had meanwhile spied and discovered the secret of the flowers) called all her friends and said, 'Let's go to the swings in the *surahonne* orchard. We'll take my sister-in-law; she'll turn into a flowering tree. If you all come, I'll give you flowers that smell wonderful.'

Then she asked her mother's permission. The queen said, 'Of course, do go. Who will say no to such things?'

The daughter then said, 'But I can't go alone. Send Sister-in-law.'

'Then get your brother's permission and take her.'

The prince came there just then and his sister asked him. 'Brother, brother! We're all going to the *surahonne* orchard to play on our swings. Can Sister-in-law come along?'

'It's not my wish that's important. Everything depends on mother,' he answered.

So she went back to the queen and complained, 'Mother, if I ask brother, he sends me to you. But you don't really want to send her. So you are giving me excuses. Is your daughter-in-law more important than you daughter?'

The queen rebuked her, saying, 'Don't be rude. All right, take your sister-in-law with you. Take care of her and bring her back safely by evening.'

Reluctantly, the queen sent her daughter-in-law with the girls.

Everyone went to the *surahonne* orchard. They tied their swings to a big tree. Everyone was playing on the swings merrily. Abruptly the king's daughter stopped all games, brought everyone down from the swings, and accosted her brother's wife. 'Sister-in-law, you can become a flowering tree, can't you? Look, no one here has any flowers for their hair.'

The sister-in-law replied angrily, 'Who told you such nonsense? Am I not another human being like you? Don't talk such crazy stuff.'

The king's daughter taunted her, '*Oho*, I know all about you. My friends have no flowers to wear. I ask my sister-in-law to become a tree and give us some flowers, and look how coy she acts. You don't want to become a tree for us. Do you do that only for your lovers?'

'*Che*, you're awful. My coming here was a mistake,' said the sister-in-law sadly, and she agreed to become a tree.

She went for two pitchers of water, uttered chants over them, instructed the girls on how and when to pour the water, and sat down to meditate. The silly girls didn't listen carefully. They poured the water on her indifferently, here and there. She turned into a tree, but only half a tree.

It was already evening, and it began to rain, with thunder and lightning. In their greed to get the flowers, they tore up the sprouts and broke the branches. They were in a hurry to get home. So they poured the second pitcher of water at random and ran away. When the princess changed from a tree to a person again, she had no hands and feet. She had only half a body. She was a wounded carcass.

Somehow in that flurry of rain-water, she crawled and floated into a gutter. There she got stuck in a turning, a long way off from home.

Next morning, seven or eight cotton wagons were coming that way and a driver spotted a half-human thing groaning in the gutter. The first cart driver said, 'See what that noise is about.'

The second one said, 'Hey, let's get going. It may be wind, or it may be some ghost, who knows?'

But the last cart-driver stopped his cart and took a look. There lay a shapeless mass, a body. Only the face was a beautiful woman's face. She wasn't wearing a thing.

'*Ayyo*, some poor woman,' he said in sorrow, and threw his turban cloth over her, and carried her to his cart, paying no heed to the dirty banter of his fellows. Soon they came to a town. They stopped their carts there and lowered this 'thing' onto a ruined pavilion. Before they drove on, the cart-driver said, 'Somebody may find you and feed you. You will survive.' Then they drove on.

When the king's daughter came home alone, the queen asked her, 'Where's your sister-in-law? What will your brother say?' The girl answered casually, 'Who knows? Didn't we all find our own way home? Who knows where she went?'

The queen panicked and tried to get the facts out of the girl. '*Ayyo*! You can't say such things. Your brother will be angry. Tell me what happened.'

The girl said whatever came to her head. The queen found out nothing. She had a suspicion that her daughter had done something foolish. After waiting several hours, the prince talked to his mother.

'*Amma, amma.*'

'What is it, son?'

'What has happened to my wife? She went to the orchard to play on the swings, and never came back.'

'O Rama, I thought she was in your bedroom all this time. Now you're asking me!'

'Oh, something terrible has happened to her,' thought the prince. He went and lay down in grief. Five days passed, six days passed, fifteen days passed, but there was no news of his wife. They couldn't find her anywhere.

'Did the stupid girls push her into a tank? Did they throw her into a well? My sister never liked her. What did the foolish girls do?' He asked his parents, the servants. What could they say? They, too, were worried and full of fear. In disgust and despair, he changed into an ascetic's long robe and went out into the world. He just walked and walked, not caring where he went.

Meanwhile, the girl who was now a 'thing' somehow reached the town

into which her husband's elder sister had been given in marriage. Everytime the palace servants and maids passed that way to fetch water, they used to see her. They would say to each other, 'She glows like a king's daughter.' Then one of them couldn't stand it any longer and decided to tell the queen.

'*Amma. Amma*, she looks very much like your younger brother's wife. Look through the seeing-glass and see for yourself.'

The queen looked and the face did seem strangely familiar. One of the maids suggested, '*Amma*, can I bring her to the palace. Shall I?'

The queen poohpoohed it: 'We'll have to serve her and feed her. Forget it.'

So the next day again the maids mumbled and moaned, 'She's very lovely. She'll be like a lamp in the palace. Can't we bring her here?'

'All right, all right, bring her if you wish. But you'll have to take care of her without neglecting palace work,' ordered the queen.

They agreed and brought the Thing to the palace. They bathed her in oils, dressed her well and sat her down at the palace door. Every day they applied medicines to her wounds and made her well. But they could not make her whole. She had only half a body.

Now the prince wandered through many lands and ended up outside the gate of his sister's palace. He looked like a crazy man. His beard and whiskers were wild. When the maids were fetching and carrying water they saw him; they went back to the queen in the palace and said, '*Amma*, someone is sitting outside the gate, and he looks very much like your brother. Look through the seeing-glass and see.'

Grumbling indifferently, the queen went to the terrace and looked through the seeing-glass. She was surprised. 'Yes, he does look remarkably like my brother. What's happened to him? Has he become a wandering ascetic? Impossible,' she thought. She sent her maids down to bring him in. They said to him, 'The queen wants to see you.'

He brushed them aside. 'Why would she want to see me?' he growled.

'No, sir, she really wants to see you, please come,' they insisted and finally persuaded him to come in. The queen took a good look at him and knew it was really her brother.

She ordered the palace servants to heat up whole vats of oil and great vessels of steaming water for his baths. She served him and nursed him, for she knew he was her brother. She served new kinds of dinner each day, and brought him new styles of clothing. But whatever she did, he didn't speak a word to his elder sister. He didn't even ask, 'Who are you? Where am I?' By this time, they both knew they were brother and sister.

The queen wondered, 'Why doesn't he talk to me, even though I treat him so royally? What could be the reason? Could it be some witch's or demon's magic?'

After some days, she started sending one or another of her beautiful maids into his bedroom every night. She sent seven maids in seven days. The maids held his hands and caressed his body, and tried to rouse him from his stupor. But he didn't say a word or do a thing.

Finally the servant maids got together and dressed up the Thing that sat at the palace door. With the permission of the disgusted queen, they left It on his bed. He neither looked up nor said anything. But this night, It pressed and massaged his legs with its stump of an arm. It moaned strangely. He got up once and looked at It. It was sitting at his feet. He stared at It for a few moments and then realised It was really his lost wife. Then he asked her what had happened. She who had no language all these months suddenly broke into words. She told him whose daughter she was, whose wife, and what had happened to her.

'What shall we do now?' he asked.

'Nothing much. We can only try. Bring two pitchers of water, without touching them with your fingernails,' she replied.

That night he brought her two pitchers of water without anyone's knowledge. She uttered chants over them and instructed him, 'Pour the water from this pitcher over me, I'll become a tree. Wherever there is a broken branch, set it right. Wherever a leaf is torn, put it together. Then pour the water of the second pitcher.'

Then she sat down and meditated.

He poured the water on her from the first pitcher. She became a tree. But the branches had been broken, the leaves had been torn. He carefully set each one right and bound them up and gently poured water from the second pitcher all over the tree. Now she became a whole human being again. She stood up shaking the water off her hair, and fell at her husband's feet.

Then she went and woke up the queen, her sister-in-law, and touched her feet also. She told the astonished queen the whole story. The queen wept and embraced her. Then she treated the couple to all kinds of princely food and service, had them sit in the hall like bride and bridegroom for a ritual celebration called *hase*. She kept them in her palace for several weeks and then sent them home to her father's palace with cartloads of gifts.

The king was overjoyed at the return of his long-lost son and daughter-in-law. He met them at the city gates, took them home on an elephant

howdah in a grand ceremonial procession through the city streets. In the palace, they told the king and the queen everything that had happened. Then the king had seven barrels of burning lime poured into a great pit and threw his youngest daughter into it. All the people who saw it said to themselves, 'After all, every wrong has its punishment.'[3]

One could say many things about this story. For instance, one of its themes resonates with our present concerns with ecology and conservation. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the person who is with her to treat it/her gently, not to pluck anything more than the flowers. Indeed, we were told by our mothers when we were children not to point to growing plants in the garden with our sharp fingernails, but only with our knuckles; our fingernails might scratch the growing ends. Poems like the following in classical Tamil speak of the sisterhood between a woman and a tree:

WHAT HER GIRL FRIEND SAID

to him [on her behalf] when he came by daylight

Playing with friends one time
we pressed a ripe seed
into the white sand
and forgot about it
till it sprouted

and when we nursed it tenderly
pouring sweet milk with melted butter,
Mother said,
    'It qualifies
as a sister to you, and it's much better than you.'
    praising this laurel tree.
So
we're embarrassed
to laugh with you here

    O man of the seashore
    with glittering waters
    where white conch shells
        their spirals turning right
    sound like the soft music
    of bards at a feast.

Yet, if you wish
there's plenty of shade
elsewhere.

    Anon, Naṟṟiṇai 172[4]

Or the Vīraśaiva poem that connects the gentle treatment of plants with other kinds of love, by Dasarēśwara, a saint who wouldn't even pluck flowers for his god but only took the ones that had dropped to the ground by themselves:

Knowing one's lowliness
in every word;

the spray of insects in the air
in every gesture of the hand;

things living, things moving
come spring from the earth
under every footfall;

and when holding a plant
or joining it to another
or in the letting it go

    to be all mercy
    to be light
    as a dusting brush
    of peacock feathers:

such moving, such awareness
is love that makes us one
with the Lord
Dasarēśwara.

    Dasarēśwara[5]

When a woman is beautiful, they say in Kannada, 'One must wash one's hands to touch her' (*kai tolakondu muttabeku*). There is also the suggestion that a tree is vulnerable to careless handling, like a woman. A tree that has come to flower or fruit will not be cut down; it is treated as a mother, a woman who has given birth. Thus the metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied in the culture. A relevant one here is that the words for 'flowering' and for 'menstruation' are the same in languages like Sanskrit and in Tamil. In Sanskrit, a menstruating woman is called a *puṣpavati* (a woman in flower), and in Tamil

puttal means 'menstruation'. Menstruation itself is a form and a metaphor for a woman's special creativity. Thus, a woman's biological and other kinds of creativity are symbolised by flowering. In this tale, as in a dream, the metaphor is literalised and extended. The heroine literally becomes a tree, produces flowers without number over and over again, as the occasion requires. It is her special gift, which she doesn't wish to squander or even display.

She makes her secret known to her sister first only because they have no money, because she wishes to save her mother some of the rigours of poverty. After that, her gift becomes known to others and she has to do it at their bidding. As described in the tale, of the five times she becomes a tree, she does it voluntarily only the first and the last time. The second time, her mother orders her to show her how she earned her money, because she suspects her of selling her body. Then the prince eavesdrops on one of these transformations, and wants to have such a woman for himself. Once he gets her, he compels her to become a tree in his bedchamber on his wedding night, and on every night thereafter. It becomes almost a sexual ritual, a display of her spectacular talent to turn him on, so that they could sleep together on the flowers from her body. Even before she gets used to it, thanks to the flowers that pile up outside her bedroom window, her young adolescent sister-in-law gets curious, puts her eye to a chink in their door and wants to show her off to her companions. She uses her clout as an in-law (and her mother's) to coerce her to go with her alone to the orchard; she and her pubescent teenage girls tease her ('Will you do it only for your lovers?'), play on the sexual nature of her talent, and force her to become a tree. And, despite her abject requests not to hurt her, they ravage the tree; when she is returned to her human state, she is left ravaged too, mutilated. It is a progressive series of violations till she finally ends up being a Thing.

In a way people have begun to treat her as a thing, asking her 'to make a spectacle of herself', displaying her secret gift. In a way, one might say, even the first time, she herself becomes a tree to sell her flowers, making herself a commodity. The fifth and last time she becomes a tree, she has to wait for the right person and the safe occasion, another bedchamber, in an older married sister-in-law's household, with a husband who has missed her and searched for her and thereby has been changed.

These five occasions seem pointedly to ask the question: when is a woman safe in such a society? She is safe with her own sister,[6] maybe her mother, but not quite with a newly-wedded husband who cares more for a display of her talent than for her safety, and most certainly not with her teenaged sister-in-law or her mother-in-law. She is safe only with a married sister-in-law (who is probably not threatened or envious), and lastly with a husband who, through an experience of loss, has matured enough to care for her as a person.

As we said earlier, she is most vulnerable when she is a tree. She can neither speak nor move. She is most open to injury when she is most attractive, when she is exercising her gift of flowering. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the one who is pouring the water to be careful not to hurt her. Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable again, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches.

The recurrent unit of the story is 'girl becoming tree becoming girl'. This is also the whole story; the recurrent unit encapsulates the career of this woman in the story. What are the differences between a woman and a tree? A woman can speak, can move, can be an agent in her own behalf, in ways a tree cannot. Yet, symbolically speaking, the tree isolates and gives form to her capacity to put forth flower and fragrance from within, a gift in which she could glory, as well the vulnerability that goes with it. It expresses a young woman's desire to flower sexually and otherwise, as well as the dread of being ravaged that the very gift brings with it. In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex, and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies—and projecting them for younger female listeners.[7] If boys are part of the audience, as they often are, the male could imaginatively participate in them which might change their sensitiveness towards women.

The repetition of the unit, girl becomes tree becomes girl, marks the divisions of the story, gives it its narrative time, the chronos of the 'chronotope'. In a typical male-centred story, the chronos is marked by the adventures of the prince, his failures and final success, often measured in threes. The spaces in the women-centred story are marked by alternations of Interior and Exterior (the *akam* and *puṟam* of classical Tamil poetics), by alternations of domestic and public space in which the action takes place. In this story, the five instances of the transformations move from her own yard to the prince's bedchamber, then to the orchard where it is most dangerous, and back to a second bedchamber. Indeed, one of the oppositions between a woman and a tree is that the former is an interior (*akam*) being, living both indoors and having an interior space, a heart (all of which are meant by the South Dravidian term *akam*), and the latter lives outdoors, in public space (*puṟam*). It is one of the ironies

of this story that she is forced to become a tree in the wrong space, in the bedchamber. And when she becomes a tree in the orchard, the greatest harm comes to her. These emphasise the special symbolic charge of the tree: it's not any old tree, but a phase in a human career, its past and future is human and female, capable of living both within and without. Such is the time-space, the chronotope, of this woman's tale. Other women's tales also play with this balance and alternation of interiors and exteriors.

In the orchard, with the wild pubescent girls, she becomes a tree, full of fears that are all too real, and she is unable to return to her whole human female being: she becomes a Thing, something which has the face of a woman but the helplessness of the tree. She is neither woman nor tree and both, betwixt and between. The Thing cannot move by itself and does not speak. She lives in the servants' quarters, both within and without. It is only when she speaks to a 'significant other', her husband in this tale, and tells him her story, that she is able to return to her original female body. She waits for recognition by him. She waits to tell her story in its entirety and give him instructions on how to heal her: pour water on her, and when she becomes a tree to lovingly put back the broken leaves and branches in their place, and pour the water on it—and she will be whole again. This is also the time when she voluntarily and for her own good undergoes the transformation. She has recovered her agency.

I'd suggest that agency in these women's tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and its being heard.[8] After the first time, every time she protests that she doesn't wish to become a tree she is not heard; she is forced to do so against her will. Many women's tales end with this kind of self-story being told and being heard. Very often, as in the story of 'The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll', it is told in the next room, to a lamp or a talking doll which says *Hm, Hm*! as a human listener would when he hears a story. And the husband overhears it and learns the truth about his wife. It moves her from being a silent or unheard woman to a speaking person with a story to tell. Indeed, the whole tale tells the story of how this woman acquires a story through experience, mostly suffering—till then she has no story to tell. In some tales, as in 'The Lampstand Woman', this is explicit: she is usually a princess whose life is a blank at the beginning; she marries and her troubles begin. She becomes a servant, usually in her own sister-in-law's house, is accused of stealing a child's necklace, and is punished. Her head is shaved and a lamp is placed on a cowdung patty and slapped on her shaved head. She becomes a living lampstand and has to light the path of visitors. But she hardly speaks till her suffering reaches its nadir, and her husband from whom she is separated arrives, and she has to light his path to his bed. He doesn't recognise her, asks for a story; she tells her own story and as the story proceeds it dawns on the husband that he is in the presence of his own wife, who is now a Lampstand Woman, to whom all these horrible things have happened unbeknownst to him. When the whole story is recapitulated in her own voice, he recognises her and the tale ends in reunion.

One may add that speech not only means agency for the woman but also sexuality. In many Kannada tales, the phrase for sexual intimacy between a woman and a man is 'they talked to each other'. In a tale about a husband who is not sleeping with his wife, the forlorn wife is asked by a caring old woman, 'Isn't your husband talking to you?' When she hears he's not, she proceeds to find ways of making the husband first talk to the wife even angrily: she asks the young woman to put pebbles in his yoghurt or rice, or pack salt into his curry so that he can get angry with her and they can have words. At the end of the 'Dead Prince' story, the prince and the young woman are found 'talking to each other all night'.

After writing the above regarding the transformation of the 'dumb' woman into a speaking person, and the relation of speech to a woman's agency, I came across Ruth Bottigheimer's pages on speech in Grimm's household tales, especially in their Cinderella. She points out how speech is an indication of power. Many recent sociolinguistic works have been concerned with the question of who speaks when, for discourse is a form of domination, and speech-use is 'an index of social values and the distribution of power within a society'.[9]

In English, one speaks of 'having a voice, having a say'; in German *mundig* (from the word for 'mouth') means legal majority, legal personhood. The poor do not have it, they are silent. Women, like children, should be seen, not heard. The good woman has a soft low voice, says little: Cordelia in King Lear is praised for it. Eve's sin begins with her speaking to Satan. 'Since the early days of the Church, women had been barred from speaking in the house of god, as well as preaching, teaching, or speaking in public,' says Judith Brown.[10] There are many jokes about garrulous women: women, generally speaking, are generally speaking.

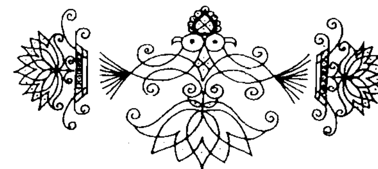
cf. Marina Warner

In the later editions of the collection of folktales that he rewrote, as a male rewriting women's tales, Wilhelm Grimm gives women little direct speech; he also substitutes *sagen* or 'said' for *sprechen* 'spoke' as the latter is more forthright. *Sprechen* emphasises the act of speaking and *sagen* the content of an utterance.[11] In his last version of 'Cinderella' (1857), Cinderella the good girl speaks only once in direct speech; the bad

women, the stepsisters and the stepmother five and seven times; the Prince in authority has eight direct speeches, and the ineffectual father only three—and two of them are mere thoughts. However, this feature may be different in different cultures: in Danish variants, where women have greater freedom and power, Cinderella is not gagged as in the German ones. It would be interesting to ask similar questions in the Indian context, especially of tales which are told by both men and women. It would also be important to see how men like myself interpret these tales and what biases they bring to them. That's one of the reasons for presenting this paper to this audience.

The fact that women have either been silent, or have written for the drawer as Emily Dickinson did, or have written under male disguises and pseudonyms, is related to this taboo on women's speech. The many women writers and artists in all three worlds and a vigorous colloquium like this one where women speak about women, and not only about women, directly address such taboos, both gross and subtle, that still exist across many cultures.

Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales



Although educated in the Indian 'classics' like the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *paurāṇik* mythologies, and so forth, Indians are also exposed to customs, tales, and beliefs that may be quite contrary to what they find in the classics. These alternative forms embody ways that together encompass the possibilities envisaged by the culture. They may present different selections, viewpoints, and solutions, expressing 'finite provinces of reality' (in Alfred Schutz's phrase) which bracket off *temporarily* other such provinces and forms. In each of the following examples, I shall explicitly contrast a well-known classical or Sanskritic story or point of view with forms I found among women, peasants, illiterate workers, and others in Karnataka. This does not mean that these different kinds of materials are exclusively the property of one class or another. It is not useful to work with terms such as 'classical' and 'folk' as terms in simple opposition, but instead they should be seen as parts of a cline; a continuum of forms, the endpoints of which may look like two terms in opposition.

Many of these tales (from my field notes) are women's tales. By 'women's tales', I mean two things: (1) tales told by women, and (2) tales that are centred around women. Sometimes the tales that are told by women are also told by men, but a single inquiry makes it clear that, invariably, the men had heard them first from a woman in a domestic setting, usually in childhood. Young boys and girls are told such tales by older women who feed them in the evening, in the kitchen—which is exclusively the realm of women. Boys, as they grow older (often no older than six or seven), may drop out of these tale-telling sessions, while girls continue until adolescence. Thus, these nonprofessional tellers of tales

tend to be predominantly women. There are tales I have heard exclusively from men in a public setting: often long, romantic ones or more intimately bawdy tales. Even among these there are some that are women-centred. The focus of this chapter is on the nature of such tales whose protagonists are women—tales about mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, wives and concubines, fathers and daughters. To these should be added village myths about goddesses, the lives of women saints, oral epics with heroines, women's retellings of the epics.[1] I shall speak here only about a small number of domestic oral tales and explore three themes: *karma* and its alternatives, stories about stories, and chastity.

KARMA AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

Much attention has recently been paid to the technical category of *karma* (O'Flaherty 1980b). The term is used and discussed widely in epic, didactic, and philosophic texts in Sanskrit, as well as in Tamil and other regional languages. It is often chosen as a, if not *the*, representative pan-Hindu, even pan-Indian, concept. Let us see how it appears in the light of Kannada folktales. But first let us consider the components of this cluster called *karma*. I suggest that *karma* can be usefully analysed into at least three independent variables:

(1) *Causality*: Any human (or other) action is non-random; it is motivated and explained by previous actions of the actors themselves.

(2) *Ethics*: Acts are divided into 'good, virtuous' and 'bad, sinful'; the former accrue *puṇya* ('merit'), the latter *pāpa* ('sin [?], demerit').

(3) *Rebirth or re-death* (*punarjanma* or *punarmṛtyu*): Souls transmigrate and have many lives in which to clear their ethical accounts. Past lives contain motives and explanations for the present, and the present initiates the future. The chain or wheel of lives is called *saṃsāra*, and release from it is *mokṣa* (salvation, liberation), *nirvāṇa* ('blowing out'), or *kaivalya* ('isolation'), in different systems.

Each of these three elements may, and often does, appear in India and elsewhere in different combinations. For instance, Freudian psychoanalysis depends on causality, a version of ethics (e.g., a punitive superego), and no rebirth. Utilitarian ethics depends on element 1 and a version of 2 in its 'calculus of consequences'. Biblical sayings such as, 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap', depend on elements 1 and 2, without 3. Certain theories of rebirth may or may not involve 1 and 2, as in ideas as varied as the phoenix rising from its own ashes, or Śaṅkara's conception that 'the Lord is the only transmigrant' (Zaehner 1969).

It seems to me that the combination of *all* these three elements (considerations of causality, ethics, and rebirth) makes for the special force of the *karma* doctrines of India. The following is a report on my search for this explicit category, as defined above, in Kannada folktales. Here is a folktale with variants recorded for six different districts, told by different castes.

THE LAMPSTAND WOMAN [*dīpada malli*]

A king had an only daughter. He had brought her up lovingly. He had spread three great loads [*khanḍuga*] of flowers to lie on and covered her in three more, as they say. He was looking for a proper bridegroom for her.

In another city, another king had a son and a daughter. He was looking for a proper bride for the prince. The search was on. Both the kings' parties set out, pictures in hand. On the way, they came to a river, which was flowing rather full and fast, and it was evening already. 'Let the river calm down a bit. We can go at sunrise,' they said, and pitched tents on either side of the river for the night.

It was morning. When they came to the river to wash their faces, the two parties met. This one said, 'We need a bridegroom.' That one said, 'We need a bride.' They exchanged pictures, looked them over, and both parties liked them. The bride's party said, 'We spread three great big measures of flowers for our girl to lie on and cover her in three more. That shows how tenderly we've brought up our girl. If anybody promises us that they'll look after her better than that, we'll give the girl to that house.'

To that, the boy's party replied, 'If you spread three great measures of flowers for her, we'll spread six.' They made an agreement right there.

When they were getting the town ready for the wedding, the rain god gave them a sprinkle, the wind god dusted and swept the floors. They put up wedding canopies large as the sky, drew sacred designs on the wedding floor as wide as the earth, and they celebrated the wedding. It was rich, it was splendid. And soon after, the princess came to her husband's palace.

The couple was happy. They spent their time happily—between a spread of six great measures of flowers, and a cover of six more.

Just when everything was fine, Mother Fate appeared in the princess' dream and said, 'You've all this wealth. No one has as much. But who's going to eat the three great measures of bran and husk?' So saying, she took away all the jasmine and spread green thorn instead. The girl who used to sleep on jasmine now had to sleep on thorns. Every day Mother Fate would come, change the flowers, make

her bed a bed of thorns, and disappear. No one could see this except the princess. The princess suffered daily. She suffered and suffered, got thinner and thinner, till she was as thin as a little finger. She didn't tell anyone about Mother Fate's comings and goings, or about the bed of thorns she spread every night. 'My fate written on my brow is like this. Nobody can understand what's happening to me,' she said to herself, and pined away.

The husband wondered why his wife was getting thinner by the day. Once he asked: 'You eat very well. We look after you here better than they do at your mother's house. Yet you're pining away, you're getting thin as a reed. What's the matter?' The father-in-law, the mother-in-law, and the maidservants all asked her the same question. When Mother Fate herself is giving her the kind of trouble that no one should ever suffer, what's the use of telling it to ordinary humans? 'It's better to die,' she thought, and asked for a crater of fire. She insisted on it.

She was stubborn. What could they do? They finally did what she asked. They robed her in a new sari. They put turmeric and vermillion on her face. They decked her hair in jasmine. They piled up sandalwood logs for the pyre, sat her down in the middle of it, and set fire to it. Then, a most astonishing thing happened. Out of nowhere, a great wind sprang up, picked her out of the burning log-fire, raised her unseen by others' eyes into the sky, and left her in a forest.

'O God, I wanted to die in the crater of fire, and even that wasn't possible,' she said, in utter sorrow.

When the wind died down, she looked around. She was in a forest. There was a cave nearby. 'Let a lion or tiger eat me, I can at least die that way,' she thought, and entered the cave. But there was no lion or tiger in there. There were three great measures of bran and husk heaped up—and on the ground were a pestle and a pot. She wondered if this is what Mother Fate meant when she had asked in her dream: 'Who's going to eat three measures of bran and husk?'

What could she do? She pounded the bran each day, made it into a kind of flour, and lived on it. Three or four years passed that way. All the stock of bran and husk disappeared.

One day she said to herself, 'Look here, it's three or four years since I've seen a human face. Let's at least go and look.' She came out of the cave, and climbed the hill. Down below, woodcutters were splitting wood. She thought, 'If I follow these people, I can get to a town somewhere,' and came down. The woodcutters bundled their firewood and started walking toward a nearby market-town, like Bangalore. As they walked on, she walked behind them, without being seen.

As the men walked, the sun set in the woods. They stayed the night under a tree. She hid herself behind a bush. Then she saw a tiger coming toward her. 'At least this tiger will eat me up, let it,' she thought, and lay still. The tiger came near. But he just sniffed at her and passed on. She felt miserable, and she moaned aloud, 'Even tigers don't want to eat me.' The woodcutters heard her words.

They got up and looked around. They saw a tiger walking away from where she was. They were stunned, terrified. When they could find words, they came close and talked to her. They said, 'You must be a woman of great virtue. Because of you, the tiger spared us also. But you are crying! What's your trouble? Why do you cry?'

She begged of them: 'I've no troubles. Just get me to somebody's house. I'll work there. It's enough if they give me a mouthful of food, and a twist of cloth. Please do that much, and earn merit for yourself.'

They said, 'All right,' and took her with them.

Nearby was a town, like Bangalore. The woodcutters went to the big house where they regularly delivered firewood, and talked to the mistress there. 'Please take in this poor woman as a servant here,' they said. She said, 'All right,' and took her in. The woodcutters went their way. She started work in the big house, doing whatever they asked her to do.

One day the mistress's little son threw a tantrum. The mistress said to her, 'Take this child out. Show him the palace. Quiet him down.' So she carried him out and, as she was showing him this and that to distract him, a peacock pecked at the child's necklace, took it in its beak, and swallowed it. She came running to the mistress and told her what happened. The mistress didn't believe her.

She screamed at her, 'You thief, you shaven widow, you're lying! You've hidden it somewhere. Go, bring it at once, or else I'll make you!'

The poor woman didn't know what to do. She cried piteously. 'No, no, I swear by God. It's that bird, that peacock, it swallowed the necklace,' she said.

They didn't listen to her. The mistress said, 'This is a tough customer. She won't budge for small punishments. We'll have to give her the big one.'

And she proceeded to punish her most cruelly. She had her beaten first, then had her head shaved clean and naked, asked them to place a patty of cowdung on it, put an oil lamp on it, and herself lighted the wick.

She was given household chores all day. At night, she had to carry the lamp on her head, and go wherever they asked her to go. Everyone called her Lampstand Woman, Lampstand Woman. Time passed this way.

One day, the mistress's elder brother came there. He was the Lampstand Woman's husband. But he didn't know anything. He came to his younger sister's house, dined there, and sat down to chew betel leaf and betel nut. The mistress sent the Lampstand Woman to light the place where he was sitting, enjoying his quid of betel leaf.

She knew at once that this man was her husband. She swallowed her sorrow and stood there, with the lamp on her head. Though he looked at the Lampstand Woman, he didn't recognise her. She had changed so much. He believed that his wife had perished in the fire. He thought this was some shaven-headed servant woman getting punished for some wrong she had done. Without even looking at her, he asked her, 'Lampstand Woman, tell me a story.'

'What story do I know, master? I don't know any story.'

'You must tell me some story. Any kind will do.'

'Master, shall I tell you one about what's to come yet or what's gone before?'

'Who can see what's to come? Tell us about what's gone before.'

'It's a story of terrible hardships.'

'Go ahead.'

The Lampstand Woman told him about the palace where she was born, how she got married, slept between cartloads of flowers; how Mother Fate appeared every night in her dream and tormented her on a bed of thorns; how she thought she could escape it all by dying on a pyre of sandalwood; how the wind miraculously carried her to a forest, and how she lived there on a meal of bran and husk; how she came with the woodcutters to this place and entered service; how the peacock swallowed the necklace when she was consoling the child; how she was called a thief and made to look like a shaven widow; and how she was condemned now to walk about as a Lampstand Woman. All this she told the prince, in utter sorrow. As he heard the story, he listened to her voice and began to see who she was. He recognised that this was his long-lost wife. He took down the lamp from her head, lovingly hugged and caressed her. He scolded his younger sister and brother-in-law for punishing his wife so cruelly. They fell at his feet and asked forgiveness—but he put his wife on his horse and left at once for his own town.

Everyone was very happy to see that the princess hadn't really perished in the fire. (Lingayya 1971, 16–20; my translation)

The story of the Lampstand Woman is told in the Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu areas. I have an example each from Tamil and Telugu and six variants from several Kannada districts. Of the several points that can be made about it, the relevant one here is the mainspring of the action. What happens to the heroine has nothing to do with her character. It is made clear she is blameless. There is no villainy, no fault. Mother Fate seems a bit jealous of the woman's good fortune. Her speech in the girl's dream makes that clear: 'You've all this wealth. No one has as much. But who's going to eat the three great measures of bran and husk?' A psychologically oriented interpreter might see in the dream an expression of the heroine's guilt over the prosperity, a need to earn it by suffering and hardship. That is plausible, but the storytellers (when I ask them) tell me it's all because of 'what's written on the forehead,' or the will of Mother Fate (*Vidhiyammā*). Character is not destiny here, nor does the character have to 'learn through suffering' as in Western (Greek or Shakespearean) drama.

Vidhi, or Fate, is usually imagined as a woman, *Vidhiyammā* in South Kannada; *Śeṭivi tāyi* in North Kannada and Marathi (Karve 1950). She writes on a newborn child's forehead all that is going to happen to him or her. Sometimes the *vidhi* function is performed by Brahmā. Several expressions refer to this writing on the forehead: *talaividi* ('head-fare'), *talaiyeḻuttu* ('head-writing') in Tamil; *haṇeli barediddu* ('what's written on the forehead'), *haṇebareha* ('the writing on the forehead') in Kannada; *phālalikhita* ('what's written on the forehead'), *brahmalipi* ('Brahma's Script') in Sanskrit and the Sanskritised dialects of various Indian languages. Some of the former phrases are also used as interjections and exclamations when misfortune strikes, like '*vidhi!*', '*talaividi!*', '*talaiyeḻuttu!*'

In another Kannada story, 'Shall I Come at Seventy or at Twenty?' (Type 938B, in the international Aarne-Thompson index of tale types; see also Thompson 1964), a young king, his queen and two children are at the height of their prosperity. On her way to the river, the queen is accosted thrice by a bird which says, 'Ask your husband when I should come—at seventy or at twenty?' The husband decides that whatever it is, it is better if it comes at twenty when their bodies are still firm and can endure anything. So he asks her to tell the bird he would prefer it to come at twenty. When the bird hears this, it follows the queen to the palace, flies in through the front door and goes out through the back. And their misfortunes begin. Suffering defeat, exile, poverty: the king becomes a poor woodcutter. The queen works as a menial maidservant, is molested, abducted, and imprisoned in a ship by a merchant. The king is disgraced and separated from his wife for many years. Finally, one of his sons wins a kingdom, the sons meet up with the merchant's ship, rescue their mother from her abductor, and reunite with their father (Hegde 1976).

In this tale, fate is not mentioned; only a sinister mysterious bird of ill omen brings misfortune. But it gives the king a choice of time, and he wisely chooses to suffer hardships in youth rather than in old age. Here, too, there is no sense of past causes or moral responsibility. Compare this with the *Mahābhārata*, where the characters act and suffer for reasons of past *karma*; celestial Urvaśi's curse makes Arjuna serve as an effeminate dancing master for one year in Virāṭa's court. The exile itself is caused by Yudhiṣṭira's wager at the dice-game, which in turn is caused by Śakuni's vengefulness and, in some versions, by the acts of his and others' past lives. The Kannada folktales depict action within the span of a single life, no more.

A god like Śani (Saturn) or a goddess like Lakṣmī, if offended, may also bring misfortune. Many of the *vrata* stories and stories about Śani's power are of this type, called the Offended Deity stories. The Śani story is intimately related to astrological beliefs regarding the planet Saturn and his seven-and-a-half-year sway over a person's life. As a variant, some tales begin with an astrologer's prophecy of misfortune. The story

works out the prophecy, despite the protagonists' struggle to escape it. An Indian Oedipus tale begins this way. A girl is born and an astrologer prophesies she will marry her own son and bear him children. The rest of the story tells of the fulfilment of the prediction. The prophecies are seen as indicators of future events and there is no question of causality (see Chapter 22 above).

Thus, instead of past *karma* as an explanation of present action, exemplified in both epic story and philosophical debate, folktales seem to depend on another set of explanatory notions: (1) arbitrary *vidhi*, or fate, who writes on the newborn's forehead, often personified as a goddess or Brahmā; (2) an offended deity who wants a defiant person to toe the line; and (3) a prophecy that cannot be evaded. Even curses are quite rare in these folktales, for they too are often earned by the individual's own acts, as in the classic case of Śakuntalā.

The overwhelming impression here is of the mysterious power of a fixed fate, which can only be obeyed and allowed to run its course. *Karma* seems to belong to another tradition altogether—with its complex intertwining of individual responsibility, multiple lives, the inexorable chain of ethical judgment and causation. The characters of these folktales live in a different ethos.

Not that our storytellers did not know about *karma*. Whenever my mother was angry with one of us, she (and all her fellow-mothers) scolded us with phrases such as, 'You are my *karma*, my *prārabdha* [accumulated bad deeds] come now to torment me in this life.' Terms of abuse as well as the Sanskrit epics were full of *karma* and its consequences—so one had to be careful to do good deeds and accumulate *puṇya*, or merit, and avoid bad ones which would heap up *pāpa*, or sin (for want of a better word), with evil consequences in our divine accounts. We also believed when we were children that if anybody was thirsty and needed water, we should not refuse that person—if we did, we would surely be reborn as lizards. But in the stories Grandmother told us there was no mention of *karma* or rebirth at all. They confined themselves to a single life-span and seemed to work on a theory of action rather different from the karmic theory.

Donald Davidson (1980) and other philosophers speak of the difference between 'actions' and 'events'. I find the distinction useful here. Actions have actors; actions express actors. Actions have reasons. Actors are responsible for what they do. Here character is destiny. But events happen *to* people. They have no reasons, only causes. Narratives motivated by *karma* convert all events into actions; in them everything has a reason, as in the *Mahābhārata*. But there is much in human reality that is not controlled by individual human beings—accident, social and economic institutions, nature itself, especially nature in its most intimate human form, one's own and others' bodies. This latter kind of reality, the uncontrollable part of it, cannot be rationalised, especially in the moment of crisis. It can only be accepted, or watched, laughed at or sidestepped and bypassed by human ingenuity. In these tales, this reality is not reasoned away, but faced. Here actions, even human actions, are seen as events. They have causes, not reasons. By enduring them, and watching for a moment of change that is the apt moment for action, and then acting—usually by speaking out and telling one's own story—one comes through. That is why many of these tales end with the heroine telling her story to 'the significant other' (often through a device, such as a talking doll or lamp), resolving the crisis, enduring her separation, reuniting her with her husband and her kin. The tale has now become her story. Till then she had no story to tell. The whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking person. This may be why it is crucial that stories should be told, and why there are stories about not telling stories and why *they* should be told.

STORIES ABOUT STORIES

Here is one such story about stories, 'Tell It to the Walls'.

A poor widow was living with her two sons and two daughters-in-law. All four of them scolded and ill-treated her all day. She had no one to whom she could turn and tell her woes. As she kept her tales of woe to herself, she grew fatter and fatter. Her sons and daughters-in-law mocked at her growing fatter by the day and asked her to eat less.

One day, she wandered away from home in sheer misery and found herself in a deserted old house outside town. She couldn't bear to keep her miseries to herself any longer. She told all her tales of grievance against her first son to the wall in front of her. As she finished, the wall collapsed under the weight of her woes and crashed to the ground in a heap. Her body grew lighter as well.

Then she turned to the next wall and told it all her grievances against her first son's wife. And down came that wall, and she grew lighter still. She brought down the next wall with her tales against her second son, and the remaining fourth wall too with her complaints against her second daughter-in-law.

Standing in the ruins, with bricks and rubble all around her, she felt lighter in mood and lighter in body. She looked at herself and found she had actually lost all the weight she had gained in her wretchedness.

Then she went home.

This Tamil tale begins with a woman beleaguered and enclosed, and ends with her in the open, all her four walls demolished. The old woman tells her stories, her family secrets, only to lighten herself, not to enlighten anyone. Nothing is said about her cruel family being converted, becoming kinder; only she has changed, unburdened of her sorrows.

In our classical literature, too, stories are told performatively—they are not merely utterances, they are part of the action, they change its course, but they affect the *addressee*. In this Tamil folktale, the tale of woe is told to express and affect the speaker's own mood, to change one's own state. It is cathartic for the teller in the tale. Such a notion of catharsis is not part of Indian classical aesthetics. Note also how emotions have weight, literally—not metaphorically—'burdened', 'heavy' or 'light-hearted'. Tales and dreams take metaphors literally. Such literalisation is not merely a literary device. It implies the sense that emotions and thoughts are substances. Material and non-material things are part of a continuum of *sthūla* and *sūkṣma*, 'gross' and 'subtle' substance allowing transformations. One may become the other.

In another tale, a barber, while he is shaving the king, discovers that the king has a donkey's ears. The king orders him never to tell anyone about it on pain of death. So he keeps the secret, but the more he keeps it to himself the fatter he grows. His wife is alarmed and, after much trying, wheedles the secret out of him. At once she begins to grow round, looking more and more pregnant, till one day, unable to bear the burden any longer, she digs a hole in the ground and tells her secret to the hole and covers it up. Out of the buried secret springs a tree. One day the palace drummer breaks a branch of the tree and makes drumsticks for his drum. When he beats his drum in the palace assembly, the drum says, '*Dum dum dum*, the king *dum dum* has the ears *dum dum* of a donkey, *dum dum* the king has the ears *dum dum* of a donkey *dum dum!*' Nothing is lost, only transformed.

A STORY AND A SONG

A housewife knew a story. She also knew a song. But she kept them to herself, never told anyone the story nor sang the song.

Imprisoned within her, the story and the song wanted release, wanted to run away. One day, when she was sleeping with her mouth open, the story escaped, fell out of her, took the shape of a pair of shoes and sat outside the house. The song also escaped, took the shape of something like a man's coat and hung on a peg.

The woman's husband came home, looked at the coat and shoes, and asked her, 'Who is visiting?'

'No one,' she said.

'But whose coat and shoes are these?'

'I don't know,' she replied. He wasn't satisfied with her answer. He was suspicious. Their conversation was unpleasant. The unpleasantness led to a quarrel. The husband flew into a rage, picked up his blanket, and went to the Monkey God's temple to sleep.

The woman didn't understand what was happening. She lay down alone that night. She asked the same question over and over: 'Whose coat and shoes are these?' Baffled and unhappy, she put out the lamp and went to sleep.

All the flames of the town, once they were put out, used to come to the Monkey God's temple and spend the night there, gossiping. On this night, all the lamps of all the houses were represented there—all except one, which came late. The others asked the latecomer, 'Why are you so late tonight?'

'At our house, the couple quarreled late into the night,' said the flame.

'Why did they quarrel?'

'When the husband wasn't home, a pair of shoes came into the veranda, and a coat somehow got onto a peg. The husband asked her whose they were. The wife said she didn't know. So they quarrelled.'

'Where did the coat and shoes come from?'

'The lady of our house knows a story and a song. She never tells the story, and has never sung the song to anyone. The story and the song got suffocated inside; so they got out and have turned into a coat and pair of shoes. They took revenge. The woman doesn't even know.'

The husband, lying under his blanket in the temple, heard the lamp's explanation. His suspicions were cleared. When he went home, it was dawn. He asked his wife about her story and her song. But she had forgotten both of them. 'What story, what song?' she said. (Linganna 1972)

That story tells us why stories should be told, according to domestic tellers. Stories must be told because they are crying out to be told. For without transmission they suffocate, they die. Untold stories transform themselves and take revenge. They fester, create an atmosphere of rancour and suspicion, as they did between the husband and wife of this story. Note that all stories are physical things: they can take the shape of objects. The immaterial and the material are part of a continuum, interchangeable. Furthermore, neither flames nor stories are ever put out. They change shapes or move to the Monkey God's temple—with interesting consequences. The Hindu law of the conservation of matter seems to read, not 'When a candle burns, nothing is lost', but 'When a candle is put out, it goes to the temple—for a gossip session.'

In classical literature, stories (or texts) must be recited because they produce results. One recites the *Rāmāyana*, or certain sections of it, for the prosperity of one's family or other such wordly results, or to propitiate a god by remembering his story. Every such text comes with a *phalaśruti*, a recital of results, telling one what one might expect from a recitation. Texts are magical, instrumental. Their reading has a purpose outside themselves, because they are efficacious. Their recitation has an efficacy similar to a Vedic or domestic ritual. But in the woman's tale, a story is a form of existence, it cannot be neglected, killed, or wished away. It has a life of its own and insists on being told and kept alive. Otherwise it can change into something else and take revenge.

Such stories also tell you that tales have to be told because they have an existence of their own, a secondary objectivity, like other cultural artifacts. They are part of the Popperian Third World or World 3, neither subject nor object, but a third realm that depends on and enters into the construction of both subjects and objects. It is in this sense perhaps that 'myths think themselves through humans', as Levi-Strauss would say (1969, 12). They hate it when they are not passed on to others, for they can come into being again and again only in that act of 'translation'. If you know a tale, you owe it not only to others but also to the tale to tell it, or else it suffocates. Like chain-letters, traditions have to be kept in good repair, transmitted, or beware, such tales seem to say, things will happen to you. You cannot hoard them.

In another story told all over south India, a son cannot understand why his poor mother gives away half the food she earns each day. She says that she is, after all, an ignorant old woman, only Śiva knows the answer to such questions. So he sets out to go and ask Śiva the question about giving away food. On the way, he meets a king who has built a tank, but it is dry; a snake who is stuck in a hole, unable to move in or out; a tree that is unable to produce any fruit; and a man whose legs are crippled by paralysis. As he meets each of them, each one asks him to ask Śiva the cause and cure for his special problem. When the boy gets there, Śiva (who is chewing betel nut with Pārvatī after a hearty meal) tells the boy that each of them has been keeping something to himself—the king has a grown daughter whom he has not given away in marriage, the snake has a jewel in its hood he must give away, the paralytic has all sorts of knowledge that he is hoarding, and the tree is hiding a treasure in its roots. As you can guess, they are eager to give the young man the jewel, the learning, the treasure, and the princess—all, of course, thanks to his mother's *puṇya*, the merit gathered by her daily gifts of food with which the tale begins. Daughters, wealth, knowledge, and food must circulate, there are *dānas*, or gifts, that, in their nature, must be given. Communities and generations depend on such exchanges and transfers. Stories are no different.

Such notions are not confined to grandmothers, peasants, and such other unlettered types in the culture. In a largely nonliterate culture, persons of every kind and from every stratum have large nonliterate subcontinents within them. Thus, folktales and other genres, such as proverbs, riddles, and songs, each in its own contextual slot, are 'constitutive of consciousness'—not only for the illiterate but for everyone. Oral literature precedes other kinds in India, offers forms, 'presumptions of meaning', that are filled out by later living. We need to study Indians' favourite folktales and their role in modelling and 'scripting' their psychic and relational lives.

CHASTITY

The Sanskritic classics of India, the two epics and the *purāṇas*, are peopled with examples of chaste wives, *pativratās*, who are devoted to their husbands. Any transgression of chastity is punished swiftly and surely, as in the case of Ahalyā. Ahalyā is seduced by Indra, who comes to her in the shape of her husband, Gautama comes home, discovers the erring couple, and curses Indra to lose his testicles. In the Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kampan, the curse covers Indra's body with a thousand vaginas. Ahalyā, the erring wife, is cursed to wander bodiless or, as in Kampan, to become stone. But see what happens in a folktale told in several south Indian languages.

THE SERPENT LOVER

There was a young woman named Kamakshi. Her husband was no good. He went after a concubine. She was patient—she thought that the man would mend his ways and return to her tomorrow, if not today. But he got more and more deeply infatuated with his harlot, and took to staying with her night and day. His wife thought, 'This is God's will, it's His game,' and held her tongue. Two or three years passed.

One day, an old woman who lived next door talked to her. 'What is this, my dear? How can you take it, when your husband lies in the pigsty of a harlot's house? We must do something about it. I'll give you some love medicine. Mix it with his food and serve it to him. Then your man will be your slave. He'll live at your feet, he'll do whatever you wish. Just watch.'

The despairing young wife thought, 'Why not?'

She brought home the old woman's potion and mixed it with sweet porridge. But, to her horror, the porridge turned blood red. She said to herself, 'This stuff, whatever it is, instead of making him love me, may make my husband crazy. It may even kill him. Let him be happy with anyone he wants. If he is alive, by God's grace, he'll come back to me some day.'

And she poured the blood-red porridge into a snake hole behind her house.

It so happened that there was a snake in that hole, and it drank up the sweet porridge. The love potion acted on it and the snake fell madly in love with her. That night, it took the shape of her husband and knocked on her door. Her husband, as usual, was out. She was startled by the knock. Who could it be? Should she let him in? When she peeped at him through the chink in the door, the man outside looked like her husband. When she talked to him, he talked exactly like her husband. She took him in without asking too many questions and he made her very happy that night. He came to her night after night and, in a few days, she was pregnant.

When the snake came to know of it, he wanted to tell her the truth. He said, 'Kamakshi, who do you think I am? Your husband? No, I'm the king of snakes. I fell in love with you and came to you in the shape of your husband.'

Then he shed her husband's form and became a five-headed serpent. She was terrified and shut her eyes. He changed back into her husband's form again.

'You know now I'm the king of snakes. I live in that snake hole behind your house. I drank your porridge, and I don't know what you put in it, but I fell in love with you. I couldn't help coming to see you and making love to you. You're pregnant now, but there's no need to panic about it. I'll see to it that everything goes well. Your husband will come back to you and live happily with you. I'll also arrange for that harlot of his to come and be your servant,' he said, and went back to his hole in the ground as a snake.

The place buzzed with the news of the woman's pregnancy, and the errant husband heard about it too. He flew into a rage. 'How could she do this to me?' he screamed. He came straight to his father-in-law and protested, 'Father-in-law, I haven't slept in the same bed with your daughter for three years now. She has taken a lover, the whore. How else did she get pregnant?'

The father-in-law summoned his daughter and asked her, 'Your husband is saying these slanderous things. What do you say?'

She replied, 'He has never been good to me. But I've done nothing wrong.'

Her father wasn't convinced.

That night she talked to the king of snakes, who said, 'Ha, that's very good. Don't you worry about it. Tomorrow the king's court will be in session. Go there bravely, and say, "The child in my womb is my husband's, no one else's." If they don't believe you, say then, "I'll prove it to you by taking the test of truth. In the Śiva temple, there is a king cobra. I'll hold it in my hand and prove to you the truth of what I say. If I'm false, I'll die." '

Next day the raja's court assembled. The raja said to the husband who was there with his complaint, 'Tell us what your suspicions are. The elders can clear the doubts.'

The husband got up and said, 'Elders, I have not slept in the same bed with my wife for three years now. How did she get pregnant? You tell me what you think.'

She rose and expressed utter surprise. 'O elders, if my husband is not with me in this, where can I go for witnesses? He comes to me every night. That's how I got pregnant. If you don't believe me, I'll go handle the cobra in Śiva's temple. If I've done any wrong, may it bite me and kill me.'

The elders agreed to the test.

The whole court adjourned to the Śiva temple. There was an awesome five-headed cobra coiled round the Śiva-*liṅga*. Kamakshi concentrated all her mind and senses, and prayed aloud so that everyone could hear, 'O lord, the child in my womb is my husband's. All other men are like brothers to me. If what I say is false, may you sting me to death.'

Then she put out her hand and took the cobra, who was none other than her lover, the king of snakes. He hung around her neck like a garland, opened all his five hoods, and swayed gently. The onlookers were awe-struck. They said, '*Che, che*, there has never been such a chaste wife. There never will be another better than her,' and saluted Kamakshi. They were ready to worship her as a paragon of wives, a *pativratā*. The husband was bewildered and felt like a fool.

Several months passed. She gave birth to a divine-looking son. He glowed and was beautiful. The husband took to playing with the child every day for a long time after dinner. The concubine became anxious about his coming later and later each day, and so asked a maid to investigate the matter. The maid reported, 'He has a lovely son. Your man plays with him a lot after dinner. That's why he comes late.'

The concubine, too, wanted to see the child. She sent a message through a discreet maid to Kamakshi that she would love to see the child of the man they both loved. Would she kindly send him with her maid for a short time?

Kamakshi, coached by her serpent king, said she would send the child on one condition.

'I've put a lot of jewellery on my son. I'll weigh him when I send him to you, and I'll weigh him again when he is returned. If anything is missing, that concubine will have to become my servant and haul pitchers of water to my house.'

The confident concubine agreed and said, 'Who wants her jewellery? She can weigh him all she wants.' Before she sent the child, Kamakshi took him to the king and weighed the child with all his ornaments in the king's presence. The concubine was very taken with the child, took him home, played with him for half an hour, and sent him back carefully without tampering with any of his ornaments.

On his return, Kamakshi and her maids weighed the child again in front of the king. The king of snakes had done his bit meanwhile. Several ornaments were missing and the weight came up short. The king at once summoned the astonished concubine and ordered her to haul water to Kamakshi's house.

Her husband gave up the concubine's company, favoured his wife in all things, and was supremely happy with her. In the happiness of regaining her husband, Kamakshi forgot the king of snakes. She was wholly absorbed in her husband and son now.

One night, the king of snakes came to see how Kamakshi was doing. He saw her lying next to her husband and child, fast asleep, contentment written on her face. He couldn't bear this change: he twisted himself into Kamakshi's loose tresses, which hung down from the edge of the cot, and hanged himself by them. In the morning, on waking, she felt that her hair has heavy. Wondering what was wrong with it, she shook it, and the dead snake fell to the floor. She was grief-stricken.

Her husband was surprised by her reaction. He asked, 'Why do you weep over the carcass of a snake? How did a snake get into our bedroom anyway?'

She replied, 'This is no ordinary snake. I had made offerings to him so that I may get my husband back. It's because of him you're with me now. He's like a father to my son. A snake is like a brahman, twice-born. Therefore we should have proper funeral rites done for this good snake and our son should do it.'

The husband agreed, and the son performed all the proper funeral rites, as a son should for a father. Kamakshi felt she had repaid a debt and lived happily with her husband and son. (Ramanujan, forthcoming)

Note how the lover in the folktale is never discovered, helps the wife get a son when she could not do so by her husband, helps bring the husband and wife together, and gets rid of her rival, the concubine. He even dies in a fit of jealous rage over her happy union with her husband, that he himself so nobly arranged.

The wife gets everything—a husband, a passionate fantasy lover, a child. She does everything right, too—she even has her lover, the true father of her child, cremated by her own son, which is the proper thing to do.

The story also mocks the classic chastity test, the test of truth. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā comes through the ordeal of fire because she is truly chaste and faithful. Here, the woman comes through the ordeal of handling a venomous snake only because she has a lover—it is her very infidelity that is used to prove that she is a *pativratā*, a faithful wife. It looks as if it takes a lover to unite a man and wife who are caught in an indifferent marriage. The audience is sympathetic to the woman in this story and enjoys her triumph over all the conventional wifely requirements.

The split in the male figure between the sullen husband by day and the passionate lover by night seems also to hint at a common phenomenon in a joint family. When a couple lives in an extended family, the man is usually forbidden to show open affection to his wife during the day, with his mother and other relatives watching; sometimes the mother may explicitly frown on or mock the wife for encouraging public demonstrations of amorousness. But at night, in the privacy of the bedroom, or at least in the dark, the husband may change into an amorous and passionate lover.

If one were psychoanalytic, one could say that the classical Ahalyā story is told from the point of view of a punishing superego, which punishes pleasure and rewards asceticism. The folktale is told from the point of view of the pleasure principle, even the id, which uses all of the sanctioning devices of the culture (like chastity tests) to get its way. The two kinds of stories represent two points of view, and they need to be taken together. The ego needs both the superego and the id. The same tellers know both kinds of stories and tell them in different contexts.

One more interesting motif deserves comment. In such woman-centred tales, the snake is a benign figure. He is often a transformed brother, a grateful helper, a father figure, and, as in the present tale, the best of lovers who gives the woman everything—child, husband, even a reputation for chastity. On the other hand, in many male-centred tales, the snakes are rivals whom the hero kills or who try to kill the hero. The motif of the lethal first night is a characteristic example: anyone who marries a certain princess is found dead after the wedding night. And the king, her father, has issued standing orders that anyone who survives the wedding night will be rewarded with half his kingdom. Then comes our hero, armed with a father's precept, something like 'Never fall asleep in a strange bed.' He offers to marry the lethal princess and does. On the wedding night, he remembers his father's precept and keeps awake. When the princess sleeps, snakes come out of her nose (obvious euphemism? upward displacement?) and are about to bite him. He cuts them up with his sword. Next morning, everyone is astonished to see this bridegroom alive and they give the couple a big gala wedding. Here, certainly, is the male fear of the first night, the terror of the *vagina dentata*, the danger of female sexuality. Such differences in the meanings of motifs ought to make us rethink the simple snake = phallus equation. It means different things in male-oriented and in women-centred tales.

In addition, the well-advertised South Asian split of the women's image between the erotic and the fertile, between mother and whore images, between Wendy O'Flaherty's sacred cow and profane mare (1980), just is not there in these tales. When I told a brahman woman the above

tale about a snake lover, she told me that this story is a ritual tale (*vrata-kathā*) regularly recited on Subbarayana Śaṣṭhi, the sixth day of the moon dedicated to cobras and to vows ensuring fertility.

These are what I would call woman-centred tales. Such tales share special characteristics. While tales that feature princes who go off on a quest for the golden bird in the emerald tree invariably end in wedding bells, tales with women at the center of action never do so. The women meet their husbands and are married formally or informally in the first part of the tale, often at the very beginning, and then the real story, usually nothing but trouble, begins. In this matter, they are unlike European tales of the Cinderella or Snow White type, which always end in marriage. The characteristic pattern of woman-centred tales begins with a first union, often a marriage, followed by a separation, and ending in a reunion and a firmer bonding between the woman and her spouse. In several of them, the middle part features the death of the husband, separation of the most drastic kind, as in this one (and in the classical tale of Sāvitri), and in the latter part the wife restores him to life. In this story the separation reaches its worst phase, her suffering its lowest depth, when the concubine usurps her place and becomes her husband's lover. An upper-class woman's fear of the rivalry of a supposedly more vigorous lower-class woman is also evident here.

For the prince on his quest, a kingdom and a bride are the prizes he wins after his adventures and hardships—that is his initiatory scenario. But in the woman-centred tales, as in their classical analogues of Śakuntala or Sāvitri, it does not seem enough for a woman to be married. She has to earn her husband, her married state, through a *rite de passage*, a period of unmerited suffering.

I have used the term 'counter-system' in my title. The term probably makes too strong a claim, but I have used it for want of something better. It implies a concerted system, while I wish to assert only that these stories present an alternative way of looking at things. Genders are genres. The world of women is not the world of men.

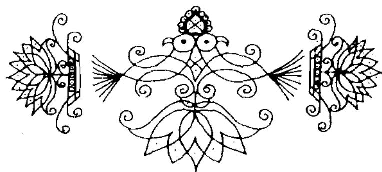
Some of these tales are creations of women's fantasy that deny in imagination the restrictions of reality, the constraints of family and custom, even within themselves. In these tales they bypass their own superego, and try to gain wish-fulfilment that is unavailable outside the world of the stories. The woman with the serpent lover manages to have both lover and husband; and the lover provides her with everything she lacks in the beginning of the tale—a male child, her husband's attentions, a reputation in the whole town as a *pativratā*. And her rival ends up as her

servant, hauling water to her door. Even her conscience is clear because her lover is a double, a look-alike of her lawfully wedded husband, and conveniently kills himself in the end. The woman begins with nothing and ends with the best of all worlds. By means of these stories, women may be partly reconciled to the reality of their lives. Freud quotes Plato as saying, 'Good men dream what wicked men do.'[2] These are the dreams of good women.

As in the stories about *karma*, here is an alternative set of values and attitudes, theories of action other than the official ones. In an indissolubly plural culture like that of India, one may look for context-sensitive systems. As in diglossia and multilingualism, different dialects or even different languages are used in different sites, occasions and functions. In a south Indian wedding, a Vedic fire ritual is presided over by male priests and conducted in Sanskrit. But after the solemn ceremony is over, other ceremonies are conducted by women with the bridegroom the only man present. There he is teased, posed riddles, shown mirrors. The in-laws sing, often scatological, certainly insulting, songs in the mother-tongue dialects to each other; the singing is dominated by especially the bride's party, which has been all this time forced to be ultra-courteous and hospitable to the groom's party. They remind one of the double plots of Shakespearean or Sanskrit plays, with a diglossia articulating different worlds of the solemn and the comic, verse and prose, the cosmic and the familial. The second alternate world speaks of what the first cannot—incest, the secret wishes of good men and chaste women, the doubts and imperfections of idealised heroes.

Such a presence of reflexive worlds; such a dialogic response of one tradition to another; the co-presence of several of them in one space, parodying, inverting, facing and defacing each other, sharing and taking over characters, themes, motifs and other signifiers, but making them signify new and even opposite things—this is characteristic of Indian creativity. I shall end with Mikhail Bakhtin's words about Dostoevsky's heroes, which also capture some sense of India's many dialogic traditions: 'Every thought senses itself to be from the very beginning a *rejoinder* in an unfinished dialogue. Such thought is not impelled towards a well-rounded, finalised, systematically monologic whole. It lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's consciousness' (Clark and Holquist 1984, 242).

Telling Tales



As Indian voices are a central concern of this *Dedalus* issue, I've chosen to speak of certain childhood voices—in tales heard from our grandmothers, aunts and cooks in the kitchen—and about how I hear them now. Since my childhood, I have done what may be called fieldwork among other people's grandmothers and other domestic tellers of tales in Kannada villages and towns. Indeed, the tales I shall relate here are samples from my collections, and from those of my fellow folklorists, made over the last two decades in Karnataka and Tamilnadu. So I hope you will hear two voices—mine and enclosed in it the voices of domestic tellers of tales, mostly women's (in my translation). One can say a great deal about these tales, but I have written about them elsewhere and my space here is limited. I shall therefore present some tales and suggest what sorts of things they may represent to someone like me who, like many other Indians, is blessed and handicapped by at least three language traditions—Sanskrit, a mother-tongue, and English.

When I say, 'childhood voices', I refer not only to my own childhood but also to that of myriad others like me and also to children today in Indian villages. The tales I am talking about are ancient but current. Even in the most anglicised Hindu families or in large cities like Bombay and Calcutta, oral tales are only a grandmother away, a cousin away, a train ride away, and mostly no further away than the kitchen. I hear that the nets of television will soon cover 90 per cent of the Indian population: I don't know if that will kill the folk narratives or adapt them or help disseminate them further. We will bracket that anxiety for now.

TALES IN CHILDHOOD

The only fairy tales we *read* in our early years were Grimm's and Andersen's, in English (as soon as we knew how to read it), among other things

in a many-volume encyclopedia called *The Book of Knowledge* that was in our father's library. We never told these stories to one another. We never connected these tales with the ones we heard downstairs from our grandmother or our cooks in the kitchen.

The stories we heard downstairs were in Tamil (or in friends' houses, in Kannada); they were oral, told by a grandmother, an aunt or a cook, never by Mother. Authority figures did not tell these stories, at least not in our family.[1] My mother told me folktales only when she had lost her authority over me, when I was in my twenties and I was interested in learning about them. Furthermore, there were taboos against telling them during the broad daylight. They were told at dusk while we were eating, for south Indian stories tend to be mealtime rather than bedtime stories. Associated with relaxed loving figures, with sleep and food, the tales were formative influences and hypnotic. We were trying hard to keep our eyes open by the time we came to the end of the story and the meal, which were timed to coincide. The prince was married, the slandered bride reinstated, and the wicked stepmother thrown into the lime kiln, just when the morsel in the sleepy hand was the very last one. The tales in the English books had names like Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, but grandmother's had no names at all. The characters were people like a poor brahman and his scold of a wife, or two sisters, one kind and one unkind, who were daughters born to a dog that lived under the palace balcony, or clever daughters-in-law who terrorised even the goddess with their farts or outwitted their cruel but stupid mothers-in-law. Our grandmothers, who had been both, always seemed to identify with the clever daughters-in-law.

Our very literate father never told us stories like these, though he too knew them and had heard them in his childhood. But if he talked to us at all, he talked about astronomy, astrology, Euclid, often the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gita* or poetry, or Chaucer and Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Dumas, or anything he happened to be reading. My father once told the whole story of *Macbeth* to my mother in the kitchen, in Tamil, with all of us listening in. It was a rare occasion and we knew it. As we grew up, Sanskrit and English were our father-tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother-tongues. The father-tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbours in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother-tongues united us with them. It now seems quite appropriate that our house had three levels: a downstairs for the Tamil world, an upstairs for the English and the Sanskrit, and a terrace on top that was open to the sky where our father

could show us the stars and tell us their English and Sanskrit names. From up there on the terrace, we could also look down on the cowherd colony, and run down noisily and breathlessly for a closer look if we saw the beginnings of a festival, a wedding, or a 'hair to hair' fight between two women (with the choicest obscenities pouring from them), or a magnificent *vilāytī*, or foreign bull, brought specially to service the local cows.

We ran up and down all these levels. Sanskrit, English, and Tamil and Kannada (my two childhood languages, literally my mother's tongues, since she too had become bilingual in our childhood) stood for three different interconnected worlds. Sanskrit stood for the Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other that both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother-tongues, the most comfortable and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children and servants. Ideas, tales, significant alliances, conflicts, elders and peers were reflected in each of these languages. Each had a literature that was unlike the others'. Each was an other to the others, and it became the business of a lifetime for some of us to keep the dialogues and quarrels alive among these three and to make something of them. Our writers, thinkers, and men of action—say, Gandhi, Tagore and Bharati—made creative use of these triangulations, these dialogues and quarrels. For those of us who were shaped in that 'triple stream', our translations, poems, lives in and out of India, searches (which we often disguised as research, analysis, even psychoanalysis), and all such explorations, including essays such as these, are witnesses to this lifelong enterprise. Though I shall use the first person singular often in this essay, I believe that neither the things I am talking about nor most of the recognitions are peculiarly mine.

WOMEN'S ORAL TALES

What follows is an oral tale—'The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll'—a typical favourite.

The king had a daughter. One daughter, but no sons. Now and then a beggar would come to the palace. He was strange, for every time he begged, he would say, 'You'll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms.' The girl used to wonder, 'Why does he say such weird things to me?' And she would silently give him alms and go in. The holy man (*bava*), this beggar man, came to the door every day for twelve years. And he said every day, 'You'll get a dead man for a husband.'

One day the king was standing in the balcony and heard him say, 'You'll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms.' The king came down and asked his daughter, 'What's this talk, daughter?'

She replied, 'This *bava* comes every day and says, "You'll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms." Then I give him something. He has been saying it for twelve years, ever since I was a little girl.'

The king was disturbed when he heard this. He was afraid the prophecy would come true. He didn't wish his only daughter to have a dead man for a husband. He said, unhappily, 'It's no good staying in this kingdom. Let's leave and spend our time in travels.' And he got his servants to pack everything, and left the palace with his entire family.

Around that time, the prince of the neighbouring kingdom fell mysteriously ill and died. But his body looked as if he had only fallen asleep. Astrologers said he would return to life after twelve years, so they didn't bury him. Instead, his father, the king, built a bungalow outside the town, laid his son's body in it, mortared and whitewashed the house on all sides, and left the body there, fully clothed and adorned. The father locked the main door and on it left a written message saying: 'One day a chaste woman who has made offerings to the gods for her husband will come here. Only she can enter the place. When she touches the door, it will open. It will open to no one else.'

It was soon after this sad event that the first king arrived there with his wife and daughter and his entourage. They were all hungry and began to cook a meal for themselves. The king's daughter went for a walk and saw the locked door. The lock was of exquisite design and gleamed from a distance.

She went near and held it in her hand. As soon as she touched it, it sprang open and the door opened. She went in. The door closed and locked itself behind her. Ahead of her were eleven more doors, one behind another. They all opened at her touch, and each closed behind her as she went through them.

Right in the heart of the house she found a man on a cot who looked as if he were dead or fast asleep. Before she could wonder about what was happening to her, how doors opened before her and shut behind her, she was in his presence.

His family had left provisions for twelve years in the house: vessels, dishes, clothes, grains, spices. The princess saw all these things around her.

She remembered the holy beggar's words and thought, 'I didn't escape it: his words are coming true.' She unveiled the face of the body. It was as dead as dead could be but as calm as a face in deep slumber. 'Well, what's to be done? It looks as if I am imprisoned here with this dead man. Let's do something,' she said, and started massaging his legs.

Meanwhile, in the forest, the mother had said, 'The food is all ready. Where's our girl?' Her father had walked outside and called her. She was nowhere to be seen. But they could hear her cries from inside the house. They called out, 'Daughter, why are you in there? Come out!'

She answered from within and told her father what had happened.

'I touched the locks, and they fell open. As soon as I came in, they locked themselves shut. I am alone here.'

'What is in there?'

'A dead man is lying here. Nothing else.'

'My girl, your luck has caught up with you. What the *bava* said is coming true. The locks can't be opened.'

They tried to enter the house from the sides and from behind, but it was as if it was sealed. They tried and tried and finally said, 'What else can we do? We'll go and leave you to work out your fate.' They left sorrowfully. Time passed, and they grew old.

For almost twelve years she tended and massaged his body. She would wake up in the morning in the locked house with twelve locked doors, and where could she go? She bathed and cooked, kept house and looked after the dead body, and thought about all the things that had happened to her.

Inside the locked house, night and day the princess massaged the dead man's legs, took ritual baths, worshipped the gods at the right times, and made offerings for her prince. Around the tenth year, an acrobat's daughter came that way. She looked all around the house, tried the doors, and at last climbed onto the roof.

The princess was lonely. She was dying to see another human face. 'If there's a chink in the house, I could pull in at least a child. If only I could have a girl for a companion,' she thought. Just then, she saw a young woman looking through a window.

'Hey, girl! Will you come inside?'

'Yes,' said the acrobat girl.

'Do you have any father or mother? If you do, don't try to come in. You can't get out. If you don't have parents, come inside.'

'Oh no, I've nobody.'

She pulled the girl in through the window. The acrobat girl was agile. She twisted and contorted her body and got in. The princess was happy; she had company now. With a companion inside, time went fast. Two more years rolled by.

The prince's twelve years were coming to an end. The time for his life to stir again was near.

One day, when the king's daughter was taking her bath, she heard the omen bird speak from the branch in the window. It said, 'The twelve years are coming to an end. If someone will pluck the leaves of this tree, grind them and press them in a silver cup, and pour the juice into the man's mouth, he will come to life again.'

The king's daughter heard it. At once she plucked some leaves, pressed the juice out into a silver cup. Just when she was about to put it to the dead man's lips, it occurred to her that she had not bathed yet. She would finish her bath, purify herself, offer worship to the Lord Śiva properly, and then give the juice to the prince. So she put down the cup and went to bathe and offer worship.

The acrobat girl asked her, 'What's this stuff in the cup? Why is it here?'

The princess told her about the bird's message and what the cup contained. As soon as she heard all this, the acrobat girl thought this was her chance. While the princess sat in worship, the acrobat girl parted the dead prince's lips and poured the juice from the silver cup. As the liquid went in, he woke up as if he had only been asleep. Exclaiming, 'Śiva, Śiva!' he sat up straight. He saw the woman next to him and asked, 'Who are you?'

She said, 'Your wife.'

He was grateful to her. They became husband and wife while the princess, the woman who had served him for twelve long years, sat inside, long absorbed in prayer.

When she came out, she heard the two of them whispering intimacies to each other and thought, 'O Siva, I did penance for twelve years, and it turned out like this. Obviously, happiness is not my lot.' She began to work as their servant, while the prince and the acrobat girl sat back and enjoyed themselves.

Yet, after all, she was a princess, born to a queen. The other girl was only an acrobat's daughter. The prince began to see the difference between them in manners and speech. He began to suspect something was wrong. So later that day, he said to both of them, 'I'm going out for a hunt, and then I'll go to the city. Tell me what you would like.'

The acrobat girl, who had been longing for her kind of gypsy food, asked for all sorts of greens and some dry flat bread. He was disgusted. A woman should ask for saris and silk and blouses, but this one asks for wretched dry bread! Then he told the acrobat girl to ask the other woman in the house what she would like. The princess answered, 'I don't want anything much. Just tell the master what I'd really like is a talking doll.'

'This one is strange too. All she wants is a talking doll,' he thought.

After a good hunt in the jungle, he brought the acrobat girl the evil-smelling greens and leaves and dry bread from some gypsies, and for the princess a talking doll. The acrobat girl was overjoyed at the sight of the rough food; now she began to thrive and get colour in her cheeks.

That night, after everyone had eaten and gone to bed, the talking doll suddenly began to speak and said, 'Tell me a story.'

The princess answered, 'What story can I tell you? My own life has become quite a story.'

'Then tell me your life's story,' insisted the doll.

So the princess told the doll her entire story, as I've told you so far. Just like that.

The doll nodded and said, 'Hmm, hmm', as the princess told her tale. The prince, lying awake in the other room, heard it all. Finally she said, 'I left the silver cup there, on that ledge, and that woman gave the juice to the prince before I got back from my prayers. Now she's the wife and I'm the servant. That's the way it turned out.' And she ended the story.

As he heard the story from where he lay in the next room, the prince felt his

anger mounting. When the story came to an end, he took a switch and lashed at the acrobat girl sleeping next to him, and drove her out of the house.

'You're not my wife, you're an acrobat wench! Get out of my sight!' he screamed.

Then he went in and consoled the princess who had served him lovingly for twelve years; and they talked to each other all night happily.

In the world outside, his father and mother had counted up the days and years. They knew twelve years were over and were anxious to see what had happened to their son. They came, and all the town with them. They found the doors unlocked and in the heart of the house the couple, prince and princess, whispering loving words to each other.

Gratefully, the father-in-law and the mother-in-law fell at the feet of their young daughter-in-law and said, 'By your good work of many past lives and your prayers in this one, our son came back to life. He looks as fresh as if he has just woken up from a long night's sleep. It's all your doing.'

They took the young couple to their palace, and celebrated the wedding with great pomp and many processions. For the grand occasion, they sent for the bride's parents, who had grown weak and old. Their eyes had become like cotton-seed, and they were ready to lie down in the earth. But their spirits revived at the good news, and they too hurried to the reunion at their daughter's wedding.

That is what I would call a woman-centered tale, as discussed in Chapter 25 above. The power of such tales may be why it is crucial that stories should be told and why there are stories about not telling stories and about why they should be told.

Stories and words have not only weight; they also have wills and rages, and they can take different shapes, as in the following example, 'The Tales' Revenge'.

A rich man from Mysore has a son. Another, from Kanara, has a daughter. The men are travelling and meet on the way. When they find out about the son and the daughter, they begin to talk about a marriage alliance between them. While doing so, night comes on. They eat together, and as they are falling asleep, the Kanara man asks the other to tell him a story. The other man knows many stories but will not tell him any and goes to sleep.

While the Kanara man lies awake, he hears voices as in a dream. One says, 'This man won't tell or teach a story to anyone. We are choking in his belly. When he walks under the banyan tree, I'll fell a branch and kill him.' Another says, 'If he escapes that, I'll crush him when he walks through the narrow passage between two rocks.' The third one says, 'I'll wait in his plate of rice as a fish hook and get him when he eats.' The fourth says, 'If he survives all of you, I'll become a snake and kill him.'

In the morning, they resume their journey. The Kanara man reopens his marriage negotiations. They agree on dowries, gifts and other such things. 'Then let's go see the young man. We can fix the wedding dates as soon as we have done that,' says the girl's father. And he adds, 'You know how it is these days, we've been looking and looking for a bridegroom. Nothing fits. Sometimes even the hands seem too short.' The Mysore man adds, 'That's right. If it's not the hand, it's the leg that falls short,' and invites the Kanara man to visit his house nearby. The other says, 'I'll walk with you on one condition. You must do as I say for the next couple of days.' The Mysore man finds the request odd but agrees, thinking, 'These chaps from Kanara are a bit strange anyway.' They start walking.

On their way, they come to a banyan tree. 'Look here,' says the Kanara man suddenly, 'let's not go under the banyan tree,' and he guides the Mysore man away from it. No sooner have they passed it, when down comes a big branch. 'It was lucky we were not walking under it,' says the Mysore man, but the other says nothing. Then they come to a place where they have to pass between two rocks. The Kanara man leads the other man away from it and goes around the rocks, when suddenly a boulder comes rolling down into the passage. 'Lucky we were not there,' says the Mysore man.

When they reach his house, the Mysore man prepares a big meal, and they sit down to eat. As soon as he begins to eat his rice, the Kanara man asks that all the rice be given to him. He quickly snatches the other's plateful of rice and overturns it. The host is surprised and offended at his guest's strange behaviour, but they move on to other kinds of food. When they've finished eating, the Kanara man asks, 'Shall we see the young man now?' But the young man's mother says, 'He isn't around. He has gone to his uncle's place.' He is really inside, but they don't want him to be interviewed, that's all.

It's night. So they make beds and offer one to the guest. But the Kanara man insists on sleeping in the same room as his host and his wife. 'How can you do that? We'll give you a bed in another room,' says the shocked host. But the Kanara man insists on sleeping in the same room, and does.

He stays awake. While the host and his wife are fast asleep on their cot, a snake comes slithering in toward them. The wide-awake Kanara man pulls out a knife and cuts it down just as it is climbing the legs of the cot. Its blood spatters on the cheeks of the host's wife and, fearful lest it be poisonous, the Kanara man quickly wipes it off her cheek with his *dhoti*. She wakes up startled, finds this strange man touching her, and screams. Her husband wakes up and is about to attack when the guest restrains him. Before it gets worse, the Kanara man speaks out: 'You may wonder why I have this knife in my hand, and why I touched your wife. I'm not after your wife. Just look under the cot.' And he shows them the pieces of dead snake.

He also tells the bewildered Mysore man the whole story about the tales that had vowed revenge for not being told, and how he had saved his host from the banyan branch, the rocks, the fish hooks in the rice, and now the snake. He pulls out from his pocket the previous day's rice in his handkerchief, and shows him the fish hooks. 'That's why I told you I'd come with you only if you would do as

I asked you to. You can now see why.' The Mysore man wonders aloud, 'Why is it I have kept all the stories to myself?'

Then they return to the wedding talks, and in a few days the wedding takes place.

But the wedding guests gossip and whisper to each other. '*Ayyayyo*, look, the bride has one hand shorter than the other. And the bridegroom has half a leg!'

When the groom's father says to the bride's father, 'How can you do this to me?' the other says, 'But I told you, these days, everything is short, even hands!' The groom's father says, 'But I told you, not only hands, even legs sometimes fall short!'

In this tale, stories have a special function. The two fathers both have something to conceal from each other—a daughter with a short hand and a son with half a leg. One of them asks for a story, and the other refuses to tell him one. There seems to be a suggestion that a secretive man tells no tales. In another tale, a clever woman finds a thief by letting them respond to a story she tells. To tell a story is to discover or reveal a secret.

As I said in Chapter 25, oral literature precedes other kinds in India in the lives of individuals and communities. It offers forms, presumptions of meaning, that are filled out by later living. It would be interesting to study Indians' favourite folktales and their role in modeling and 'scripting' Indians' psychic and relational lives. Even Sanskrit mythologies have to be studied not only from texts, as they have been, but on the ground—as they are selectively remembered and told in context. For they are not only in written texts; they also have a parallel life in the oral traditions. They have been studied as if they were all equidistant, equally well known to every native, equally important. And they have been quarried for the commentators' own (usually Western) concerns, like psychoanalysis, without any regard to which myths or episodes are valued by the users, or how and why. We need to work at Indian mythologies as if they were folklore in order to get a nuanced and true sense of what they are about. By doing so, we could also hear the dialogue between the Puranic mythologies and the non-literate creations like those carried and polished and renewed by nameless and subtly powerful grandmothers.

TALES HAVE RELATIVES ALL OVER THE WORLD

In childhood, when we heard stories like 'The Tales' Revenge', we could not have known that they were told all over India, even all over the world, and that they had had past lives in old texts like the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (The Ocean of Story). I didn't know for a long time that there were international indexes of types and motifs, marked with numbers just as library books, bank accounts and prisoners—and not only prisoners—are these days.[2] I discovered these folktale indexes when I accidentally met an American folklorist, Edwin Kirkland, in a small town in Karnataka in my early twenties, and we spent two happy evenings swapping tales and riddles and proverbs. When he went back to Bombay, he sent me Stith Thompson's *The Folktale*, in which I found worldwide parallels for my household tales.[3] I then re-read the Grimms, discovered Afanasiev's Russian tales, and found the eleventh-century Sanskrit reworkings of local tales, *The Ocean of Story*. This last work was translated into English by C. H. Tawney in the nineteenth century, in ten volumes, with fascinating cultural histories by philologist N. M. Penzer on things we used every day, like betel leaves and umbrellas—their distribution, their uses in ritual, their profound symbolic values. The Brothers Grimm, or my idea of them, also became a model, and I started collecting folktales somewhat methodically from everyone around—my mother, aunt, friends and people in the surrounding villages. I was twenty-three and I discovered what I had lived in and what had lived in me since childhood—the unofficial verbal world of the dialects, that literature without letters (*eluta eluttu* in Tamil).[4]

Connections and contrasts began to appear between the mother-tongue tales and the Sanskrit myths, between the tales of Indian villages and kitchens and the European tales of Grimm and Afanasiev. I know now, for instance, that 'The Tales' Revenge' has the same plot as 'Faithful John' in the Grimms' collection, except that the latter doesn't have the motif of the untold tales that vow vengeance on the teller who won't tell them. 'Faithful John' is about a loyal servant who overhears two birds talking about four disasters that await his princely master—a falling tree, a heavy city-gate, a collapsing bridge, a snake in the bedroom. The birds also say that anyone who reveals the secret will turn to stone. Without any explanations, Faithful John averts the disasters (as the bride's father does in 'The Tales' Revenge') and finally when the prince, his master, suspects John of molesting his wife when John has just saved her from a serpent in the bedroom, he is forced to reveal the secret of the four disasters. As he finishes telling each one, a part of his body is petrified. With the fourth secret, John is all stone, a statue. He is restored to life only when the prince's wife is willing to sacrifice her infant son.

I find from the type indexes, and from old issues of journals like the *Indian Antiquary* (especially 1890–1900), that this version of the story is

also told in different parts of India. But the oldest version is in the eleventh-century collection, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, which opens with the revenge of the untold tales. 'The Tales' Revenge' is told among the Gond and Bastar tribes in central India. There are German studies of 'Faithful John' showing that the story was initially Indian.[5] But, strangely, or not so strangely, all the indexes, even the Indic ones, assimilate the Indian tale to the European type of Faithful John, for the indexes are made from the point of view of European materials. Reversals of form and meaning are not perceived or noted—only similarities in motif and generalised structure guide the typology. 'Faithful John', in the Grimms' collection, is about secrets that cannot be told or that can be told only on pain of death (also a classical Indian motif). But 'The Tales' Revenge', and many other oral tales told in summary here and elsewhere in my essays, focus on the tale that cries out to be told, the secret that will kill its keeper or swell the body till he or she tells it all somewhere, to a tree, to walls that have no ears. That is an important difference.

Tales are interregional or international in plot and motif but not in what they tell and mean. Types in the indexes keep tallies, but they tell us nothing about meanings. Only individual tellers and their tellings do. Tale types and motifs are useful bibliographical devices; they must not mask differences but lead us back to their sources, the tellings, to what are usually dismissed as variants. For not invariants, but their living use by the variants, is our study. The much-maligned but quicksilver variant is our true focus.

STORIES FOR SMALL CHILDREN

As I've said earlier, the stories change a great deal depending on where they are told, who tells them, and to whom they are told. The grandmother telling a story to a child in a kitchen at dinnertime, the *vratakathā* (or ritual tale) told in the outer parts of the house or the yard, the mendicant teller who recounts a romantic tale on the verandah, or narratives of the professional bard who is invited to sing, dance and recite a long religious or romantic epic in a rich man's hall or a public area—these are all different genre, style, number of stock formulas and topics, in the accompaniment of other actors or instruments or props like pictures.

We seem to move through a continuum here from *akam* to *puṟam*, from 'interior' forms to 'exterior' ones, as the classical Tamils would say. These two important words carry a set of concentric meanings according to context. *Akam* means interior, heart, self, house, household; *puṟam* means exterior, outer parts of the body, others, the yard outside the house, people outside the household. I have argued elsewhere that genres, themes, occasions, styles, and other discourse properties in the south Indian communities tend to illustrate the poetics of *akam* and *puṟam*. They come in arrays, in a sort of ecology of genres, where each has a niche, a function. Each occupies, expresses, and constitutes a 'finite province of reality'. Myth and folktale, proverb and riddle, theatre and ritual performance have places on this continuum, this scale of forms.[6] Let me illustrate the notion that tales have special features for certain audiences with just one kind of story, the kind that is told to small children.

Here is one we all heard as small children—'Sister Crow and Sister Sparrow'. It is a story told in several languages today in south India.

> Sister Crow and Sister Sparrow are friends. Crow has a house of cow dung, Sparrow one of stone. A big rainstorm washes away Crow's house, so she goes to Sparrow and knocks on her door.
>
> Because she is feeding her children, Sparrow makes Crow wait at first. When Crow knocks again, Sparrow is feeding her husband. When Crow knocks a third time, Sparrow is putting her children to bed. Finally, she lets Crow in and offers her several places to sleep. Crow chooses to sleep on the chickpea sack.
>
> All night long, she munches on chickpeas and makes a *katum-katum* noise. Whenever Sparrow asks her what the noise is, Crow says, 'Nothing really. Remember you gave me a betelnut? I'm biting on it.' By morning she has eaten all the chickpeas in the sack. She cannot control her bowels, so she fills the sack with her excrement before she leaves.
>
> Sparrow's children go there in the morning to eat some peas and muck their hands up with what Crow has left.
>
> Sparrow is angry. She invites Crow again to visit, and when she is about to sit down, puts a hot iron spatula under her and brands her behind. Crow flees, crying *Ka! Ka!* in pain.

Children laugh a lot at this story—especially at the crow filling the sack with her excrement, Sparrow's children getting their hands dirty with it, and Sparrow's revenge. But it is an ambiguous story. Sparrow, obviously a tidy and successful housewife, is not given to incontinence; her house is firm, her routine well ordered—psychoanalysts would happily relate these virtues to anal continence.[7] Crow is disorderly, incontinent. Her house of dung cannot withstand a storm; she can neither control her all-night guzzling nor the morning's unloading of her bowels. She is punished by a branding on her bottom. On the other hand, I have always felt a certain ambivalence, and so did the tellers and the other

children, about Sparrow. She is not generous or hospitable; she keeps Crow waiting in the rain. Because of her grudging hospitality, one feels Sparrow somewhat deserves Crow's untidy return. Children laugh gleefully at Sparrow's discomfiture and enjoy Crow's filling up the sack with nightsoil.

The typical audience for this kind of story consists of children who are just being toilet-trained (three to five years after birth, much later than children in America are trained). Patterns of toilet-training are said to be significant in any psychoanalytic interpretation of personality. We know that Indian patterns of child-rearing are strikingly different from American ones.[8] The Crow and the Sparrow story, I've often thought, was part of our toilet-training. Many of the stories of this sort are not only about small animals (sparrows, ants, frogs) winning over bigger ones. They are also quite preoccupied with urination and defecation, with sphincter control, as children of that age tend to be. Martha Wolfenstein's book on children's humour documents this preoccupation in English children.[9] A collection of Indian stories told to small children would be instructive. Such stories also talk about the discomfiture of small people—mocked for their shortness or thick lips and the anger they feel, the projections that cannot quite distinguish self from non-self. I shall give only one more example—'Dwarfs'.

A he-dwarf and a she-dwarf lived together. When the dwarf went to dig holes in a field, the she-dwarf brought him food. She lowered her basket and called him: 'Midget, midget, come eat!'

When he heard her call him midget, the dwarf was angry. He went after her to cut her to pieces. She ran. But he followed till he caught her, and then cut her to pieces. He buried the pieces in the earth, and a *togari* plant sprouted on it. The *togari* plant grew tall. The pods dried and rattled in the wind. One day, when the dwarf was walking that way, he heard the *togari* plant rattle its pods and say, 'Midget, midget, *gulak, gulak!*'

So he cut the plant and gave it, leaf and pods and all, to the buffalo. The buffalo ate it and mooed, 'Midget, midget, *booynk, booynk!*'

He killed the buffalo and gave its meat to the dog, which began to bark, 'Midget, midget, *owk, owk!*'

In a fury, the dwarf cut up the dog and threw it into the river. As it flowed over the stones, the river said, 'Midget, midget, *dadak, dadak!*'

So the dwarf took a knife and went into the river to cut it to pieces. But he drowned in it. Thus the he-dwarf and the she-dwarf came to a bad end.

But you are here and alive. Sleep now.

I must hasten to add that tales are not psychological in the way they

treat the insides of each character; most folktale characters have no insides, no psychological depth. But the tales explore psychological issues in the design and outcome of the action. In the Crow and the Sparrow story, the contrast in characters, their houses, their behaviour and the presence of an audience of child[ren] in the story itself enact psychological notions. Like all fantasies (and [un]like psychological novels), tales do not explore or express psychological truths in parts, characters, or single episodes but in relations, in the patterns and figures these elements make as a whole. All sorts of things we express conceptually are expressed through these narratives in their concrete relational webs: self and other, developmental stages, male and female, rites of passage, intimacy and alienation. Even more than mythologies which, contrary to fashionable psychological explanations, tend to deal with social and cosmic issues rather than psychological matters, the domestic tale is concerned with near kin and family, with *akam* in the Tamil sense, as interior forms, and therefore with all those relations with oneself and significant others that together make or unmake, move or arrest, the self in its career.

Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs in this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish-fulfilments, and sometimes 'by indirection find direction out'. What is supposed by analysts to be repressed and hidden is open and blatant in these tales: fathers pursue daughters; brothers, sisters. Cannibal sisters eat their younger siblings; mothers marry sons unwittingly and bear sons, thereby messing up neat kinship diagrams; and young men wish to marry no women but instead their own left halves.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The tales do not always follow an opening formula like 'Once upon a time'. Yet special phrases found only in folktales, like *ondanondu kaladalli*, 'at one time' in Kannada, and *ore our urie*, 'in a certain town' in Tamil, often mark the opening of tales. These turn the key for our entry into a tale-world and a tale-time, and let us cross a threshold into another kind of space.

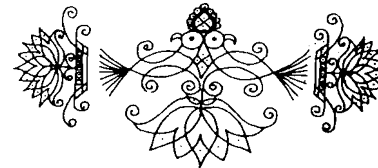
And there are closing formulas that mark our exits from this tale-world. My favourite in Kannada is *avaralli, navilli*, 'they are there, and we are here'. In Telugu, they say, 'The story has gone to Kanchi, and now we come home'. In Tamil, they say, *kade kadeyam, karanamam*, 'seems like a story, O a story, as if that's reason'.

These closures break any identification with the characters, separate our world from those of the stories, emphasise their fictive nature, their artifice and fantasy. Furthermore, when my favourite tellers tell a story, there are no adjectives at all describing inner or outer features (as there are in bardic tellings)—that is, there is no editorialising, no telling us what to feel. It is almost as if the story tells itself. When the characters speak, there is no sense of realism but a sense that they are speaking in quotation. They seem to say, *Larvatus prodeo*, 'I advance, pointing to my mask', as Roland Barthes would have said.

Folklore, contrary to romantic notions of its spontaneity or naturalness, is formal. It makes visible its forms. Identification and dis-identification (of the listeners with the characters) have their triggers in the tales and happen at different stages of a tale or a performance—not unlike the processes by which a person is possessed or dispossessed in the course of a possession-ritual.

I once found in a tale translated from Oriya a charming closing sentence. It says very well what I wish to say about breaking the link with the fictive world that may seem quite real while it lasts, though it is not. At the end of a romantic king-and-queen story, the Oriya teller says, 'I saw the prince the other day at the market, but he wouldn't talk to me.'

Tell It to the Walls: On Folktales in Indian Culture



No one seriously interested in India and its culture can afford to ignore oral traditions. Oral folk genres such as proverbs, riddles, jokes, lullabies, tales, songs and ballads, and epic-length narratives in prose and verse, along with non-verbal folklore (transmitted orally, through apprenticeships) such as dances and games, floor and wall designs, crafted objects from toys to giant outdoor horses, and composite performing arts like street magic and theatre—all of these weave in and out of every aspect of Indian life, in city, village and small town. What Westerners separate into art, economics and religion is moulded and expressed holistically in India. One's sense of what is beautiful and poetic, of what is moral and right, and even one's most abstract sense of values are shaped in childhood by these verbal and non-verbal environments. In a largely non-literate culture such as India's, everyone—rich and poor, high caste and low caste, professor, pundit and ignoramus—has inside him or her a non-literate subcontinent.

Another, more obvious reason to attend to oral traditions is that a large part of India's population is unlettered. Literacy figures reveal large gulfs between rural and urban dwellers and between men and women. A few figures will make the point.[1] According to a current reckoning, the total number of literates age seven and above in India is approximately 52 per cent. But if we separate males from females, the estimated total for males is above 60 per cent, and the total for females, around 40 per cent. Taking into consideration rural and urban divisions yields the following estimated percentages of literate persons over the age of seven years.[2]

	Rural	Urban
Males	57.1	83.5
Females	30.6	65.6
Total	44.2	75.1

There are also major differences in literacy between tribal and non-tribal populations, among members of different religious groups, and between one region and another. Because India's active cultural world includes large numbers of women, children, tribal peoples, and underprivileged classes, as well as a majority of people in certain low-literacy regions like Bihar, no understanding of Indians' inner lives can be achieved without careful attention to oral traditions expressed in the dialects of everyday life.

To illustrate the vastness and variety of what may be called 'Indian', one has only to look at the living languages that represent the many regions, religions, and social strata. Censuses report some 3,000 spoken mother-tongues or dialects with distinct names. These may be classified into more than 100 languages that belong to 4 different language families, written in 10 scripts. Fifteen of the languages have long-standing written literatures. To these should be added Sanskrit, the father-tongue, and English, which came into the Indian repertoire in colonial and post-colonial times. And oral traditions of every kind (beginning with the Vedic texts in Sanskrit, transmitted orally but accurately by a specially trained elite over millennia) abound in each of these languages, surrounding every cultural expression.

Over the centuries, oral media have been supplemented by other media: manuscripts and inscriptions on stone and copperplate, printed books and newspapers (mostly since the nineteenth century), and, more recently, electronic media like television, video cassettes, and audio cassettes. These media have always interacted with each other and produced new effects: a work might be composed orally but transmitted in writing; or it might be composed in writing but transmitted orally, in a recitation or a play, or on radio, film or television.

In earlier times, memorisation and writing were the only means of storing a work. With recent inventions, recording devices can store oral compositions and complex performances on tape and film. Thus, the new media combine the face-to-face qualities of oral performance with the permanence of the written and the multiple reproductions of print.

In an oral performance, the singer or narrator is in the same place, time, and context as the listener, and the performance is one of a kind,

unrepeatable. With writing, the work becomes independent of the author, and the reader can be in another place or time. With the printing of multiple copies, the ownership of the physical manuscript is no longer confined to a small number of scholars, as it used to be. With fax and telegraphy, the written word no longer depends on transportation. With tape recording, speech too can be released from the speaker (as writing was from the writer) and carried far from its origins. With disc, tape, and radio, what could once be heard only at a certain time and in a certain place (say, the wake-up chant sung to the Lord at dawn in the temple on the Tirupati hill) can be broadcast to anyone who wishes to listen.

Thus, information and the arts are becoming increasingly democratised. With these new media, a 'secondary orality', oral presentations without the limitations of face-to-face communication ('primary orality'), came into being. How the former will affect the latter is yet to be determined.

The new media have not supplanted the oral—at least not so far. Orally composed and transmitted folk genres have become part of every new medium. With writing, folk songs and folk narratives were recorded or retold in writing. The great Indian epics—the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—as well as the great collections of stories—the Buddhist *Jātakas*, the *Pañcatantra* (fifth century), and the *Kathāsaritasāgara*, the eleventh-century 'ocean of stories'—are texts based on what were originally oral traditions. Writing did not necessarily fix them, nor did it prevent their having other and parallel lives in folk traditions.

The Indian epics, for instance, are known to most Indians not through Sanskrit originals but through regional retellings and oral versions often sung and enacted by the lowest castes. Women's songs may tell their own *Rāmāyaṇa* stories with a feminine point of view, with characters and incidents not found in the Sanskrit texts. For example, the standard *Rāmāyaṇas* celebrate the birth of the heir and hero, Rāma. But Telugu women's songs focus on the way his mother suffered labor pangs before the hero was born.[3] The sufferings of his wife, Sītā, are also highlighted. Certain folk poems add sequels to the epic, relating how Rāma is unable to contain and conquer a thousand-headed demon and Sītā goes to war to destroy the demon. The epics also receive oral commentaries in local languages that render them relevant to contemporary audiences by drawing lessons for the present and relating mythic events to current mores and politics.

Even when village women tell internationally known tales, like the Oedipus story in which a man marries his own mother, their version is

told from the point of view of the mother: it is she who is cursed to marry her own son, tries to escape her fate but is caught in it, marries him, discovers it, and kills herself.

With print, multiple copies actually helped the circulation of texts in the oral medium, especially religious ones widely revered and used for recitation, like the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the sixteenth-century Hindi retelling of the Rāma story.[4] With video, some of these performances were more directly disseminated, and with television, new serials based on ancient texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* were created. These serials were more popular than any soap-opera that Indian television had ever broadcast. When the epics were shown, public life came to a halt; the streets were empty, stores were closed and families and neighbours gathered around televisions, often with offerings to the gods who appeared in the show.

Legends, ballads and folktales have inspired films as well. Indeed, one could hazard the generalisation that many popular Indian films are the true inheritors of Indian folk performances. Folk performances in dance, music and theatre, once confined to certain regions (dance dramas like *yakṣagāna* in south Kanara on the west coast), are now available on national radio and television—and influence modern urban performances. Even foreign plays like *Macbeth* or Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechuan* have been played in experimental folk adaptations. Two of the prize-winning plays in Kannada this year (Girish Karnad's *Nāgamaṇḍala* and Kambar's *Sirisampige*) were modern interpretive reworkings of anonymous folktales. Modern media, in turn, have begun to affect folk performances—film songs and sequences have influenced village songs and presentations, though the extent of the influence is still to be studied.

While oral traditions precede, prepare, support, and comment on all other cultural performances, new forces enter the scene with each of the later media (from manuscript and print to television and film). The sociology of information becomes increasingly complex. A manuscript requires a scribal class, the preparation of papyrus or paper, an ironsmith to make a stylus or a pen; printing requires a printing press and specialised workers and materials (paper, fonts, ink, and so forth). Television and film depend on a large crew of specialised workers, artists, administrators, and intermediaries, as the long lists of credits show. With each medium, new classes and professions, a bureaucracy and an institution are born. With the media's increasing reach and power, more money is involved. And with each new medium, new forms of censorship are born to contain and control the new powers.

While underground publications and even films may exist, only the primary oral traditions are truly out of the reach of censors: even in the most tightly controlled totalitarian societies, political jokes flourish. Around every master-narrative of official history, many unwritten traditions swirl and circulate. Hugh Trevor-Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler* could not have been written without oral histories and personal interviews with those of Hitler's contemporaries who knew much but wrote nothing. Thus, oral histories are important not only in non-literate civilisations and situations but also in cultures fraught with modern public media that censor and edit news and history.

For this reason, oral traditions carry counter-traditions, critiques of every major cultural form and idea. In India, for instance, every official idea, however philosophic, like *karma* or *māyā* or the sacredness of *gurus*, has its critique in oral satires. Gods, kings, brahmans, doctors and officials, along with mothers-in-law, demons, robbers, tigers and other such terrifying beings, are all ridiculed.

ORAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEXT

Of all oral genres, I would suggest that narrative is the most pervasive, varied and influential. From jokes to epics, from myths and legends to folktales, narrative interpenetrates every aspect of Indian art and life. Just as no oral tradition (in genres like riddle, proverb, song and lullaby) is the special monopoly of the illiterate, stories too are everyone's property. They are part of one's childhood, one's philosophy, one's politics. For instance, in childhood I heard the following story.

A foolish *guru* had equally foolish disciples. They once went on a pilgrimage. After many misadventures, they came to a river. One of them said, 'I've heard this river is very treacherous. It swallows up people. We must be very careful.' The *guru* agreed and said, 'We should find out if it is asleep or awake. We can cross it if it's asleep.' It was evening and they had lit a fire. One of the disciples picked up a burning piece of wood from the fire and ran to the river, stood at a distance and plunged it into the water. Naturally, the water hissed and there was a wisp of smoke. The disciple got frightened and ran back in panic and said, 'The river is awake and it's angry. When I plunged in the burning piece of wood the river hissed like a snake and let out smoke. I'm terrified.' All of them shuddered and the *guru* said, 'Let's keep at a safe distance and make no noise. Let's sleep in these woods till morning and try again.'

The next morning he sent a disciple to the river. This time, he took the same piece of wood, and carefully thrust it into the water. There was, of course, no hissing and no smoke. He came back and reported to the *guru*, 'I think the river

is fast asleep. We should cross now quietly without waking it.' And all of them held on to each other and carefully and silently crossed the river to the other bank, when it occurred to one of them that they should check to see if everyone was safe. He counted everyone except himself and came up short. 'We were thirteen when we came. Now we're only twelve! The treacherous river has swallowed up one of us!' he cried. The *guru* asked him not to jump to conclusions and asked someone else to count. He too counted twelve, everyone except himself. Still another counted, with the same result. The *guru* too counted and came up with twelve, as he too didn't count himself. Then they all began to cry, 'This horrible river has swallowed up one of us and we don't even know who he is! What shall we do?'

Just then a stranger was passing by, asked them what the matter was and soon found out what fools these people were. He said, 'I know how to bring back the missing man but it'll cost you money.' They gave him whatever money they had and he made them all stand in a row, took a stick and stood behind them. Then he said, 'I'll give you a blow with this stick and each of you should say your name and count.' He hit the first man who screamed with pain and said, 'One! My name is Zany.' Then he hit the second man who cried out, 'Two! My name is Moron.' And he struck each one of them till all of them had said their names and reached the count of thirteen. Though they all had bruised backs, they were delighted that their lost brother had been restored to life by this magician.

In childhood, this was a comic tale about counting. Many years later, I found that Śankara, the great seventh-century Hindu philosopher, commenting on how people forget the self and think of everything else, told this story in his work on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, an early religious text. Later, I heard the story told in a speech by a wily politician, who was trying to persuade the people of a state that they should count themselves first in any calculation of national interest, or else the economics would be all wrong. Thus, the same story can have multiple contexts and a variety of uses and meanings.

Stories are used every day to entertain, to teach a lesson, to make a psychological, religious, or political point. Grandmothers tell small children stories during mealtimes so that they will eat more. Stories are told at bedtime not only to put children to sleep but also to keep adults awake—during work sessions when workers are slicing betel nuts all night or rolling *bidis* (cheap local cigarettes). Meanwhile, many kinds of social and psychological messages are carried into the listeners' minds almost unawares, often to be pondered afterwards, possibly years later—as I did with the above story. There are special tales told to children when they are three or four, when they feel small, when they are preoccupied with the control of bodily functions—such tales break taboos (which they are just learning) and talk explicitly about excretion and so forth. Other comic and bawdy tales describe the plight of virgin men or women on their wedding night.

Folktales have opening formulas like 'Once upon a time . . .' that let you into the story world, and closing formulas like 'They are there and we are here' (in Kannada) or 'The story went to Kanchi and we came home' (in Telugu) that clearly bring you back to the world of daily reality. Enclosed between them, within the fantasy world of the tale, many painful or taboo subjects may be explored, like abandonment, sibling or parental cruelty, and incest. Fears are faced and resolved, anxieties roused and relieved. Figures of power in family and society (or the imagination) are shown to be gullible creatures.

Furthermore, such tales question and comment on the official notions and myths of the culture—like *karma*, or the notion that the world is an illusion, or that *gurus* are truly wise. For every official version of a virtue, one can find folktales that show you its underbelly. For instance:

There was a *guru* who was very eloquent about the doctrine of *māyā*, or illusion. He spoke passionately and convinced his disciples that the whole world was illusion, nothing but illusion. Just then, a mad elephant happened to break loose and run into the area where they were sitting. The *guru*, sensing danger, quickly got up and began to run. The disciples said to him, 'Sir, why are you running? The elephant is an illusion!' The *guru* said, 'Yes, and my running away is also an illusion!' and fled for his life.

One could give many examples of how tales confront many problematic aspects of the culture, and give voices to people who are deemed voiceless and underprivileged, like women and children, the lowly, the poor, and the unlettered. But these 'texts' that circulate and change meaning according to context, saying things otherwise unsaid and maybe unsayable, also comment on themselves. These tales about tales carry insights in their contemplation of the genre.

TALES ABOUT TALES

Storytellers think with stories. So it is important to look for the poetics implied by their tales and the way they tell them, and by tales about tales. Just as there is language about language (called 'meta-language'), all the arts have themselves as subjects: plays about plays (for example, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the play within a play in *Hamlet*), paintings about the painter painting (Escher's hand drawing itself, Velasquez's self-portrait in a mirror), music that quotes other

music, and films that refer to other films either in tribute or parody (Truffaut's films and their reference to Hitchcock). So too, verbal folklore, which is only one kind of oral tradition, has its meta-folklore: proverbs about proverbs, jokes about jokes, stories about stories.

Here, I shall concentrate on one genre—tales about tales told in south India (in Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu). These stories tell us how the tellers and users of folktales think about tales—a perspective just as important as the poetics of written texts. However, there is no substitute for the stories themselves, which say much more than one's commentary on them. As Isadora Duncan said to someone who asked the meaning of a certain dance, 'If I could tell you what it meant, I wouldn't have to dance it.'

As I noted in Chapter 25, the tale called 'Tell It to the Walls' (which could be an epigraph for a weight-loss program) begins with a woman beleaguered and enclosed, and ends with her in the open, all her four walls demolished. The old woman tells her stories, her family secrets, only to lighten herself, not to enlighten anyone. Nothing is said about her cruel family being converted, becoming kinder; only she has changed, become unburdened of her sorrows.

In our classical literature too (for example, the substories in the *Mahābhārata*) stories are told performatively—that is, they are not merely utterances, they are part of the action. In the epic, when the eldest of the five brothers is deeply depressed in his exile after he has gambled away their kingdom and their freedom in a dice game, a sage tells him the story of Nala—who also gambles away his inheritance and has to wander in the forest. In the story, Nala finally regains his kingdom and the wife he has lost. Hearing the story, Yudhiṣṭhira, the listener, sees himself in the middle of his own story, which is not yet over. He sees that what happened to Nala could happen to him, too. And the sage-storyteller also gives him the power and the art to win at dice. Thus, the story within affects the story without, the hero of the inner story holds up the mirror to the hero of the epic. The listener is changed. But in 'Tell It to the Walls', the tale of woe is told to express and affect the speaker's own mood, to change her own state. It is curative for the teller to tell the tale.

Note also how emotions have weight, literally, not metaphorically, as in phrases like 'light-hearted' or 'heavy-hearted'. Tales, like dreams, take metaphors literally. As I observed in Chapter 25, such literalisation is not merely a literary device. It implies that emotions and thoughts are substances. Material and non-material things are made of the same stuff, part of a continuum: body or matter is *sthūla*, or 'gross' substance, whereas things of the mind or thoughts and feelings are *sūkṣma*, or 'subtle' substance. One may become the other, or affect the other, as modern psychosomatic medicine would also tell us. We can see what happens to stories and songs in 'A Story and a Song' and the story of the poor mother who gives away half her food every day, on which I have commented in detail in Chapter 25.

THE AUDIENCE

An oral tale must have a listener present and participating, for oral cultures develop in face-to-face communities. In a Telugu tale, a king was fond of hearing stories.[5] When he heard of a low-caste barber's famous narrative powers, he sent for him. He sat on his throne and the barber sat at his feet, but the barber could not find words for his tale. When the king asked him what the matter was, the barber reluctantly told him, 'I'm used to sitting in a place higher than my listeners, but I can't do that with your majesty. I also can't tell a story unless someone responds to it by saying "*Hm hm*".' The king felt it was beneath his dignity to sit below the barber and also to respond to his tale with the usual sounds of '*Hm hm*', as ordinary people would. So he ordered another low-caste man to sit a step below the barber and respond to him. Now the barber could tell his story, but he could only address it to the man who was responding to him. The king felt left out. So finally he made a new rule that tellers of tales could sit on a level equal to that of the listener, even if the latter was a king. And now the barber could tell his stories freely and delight the king.

Whenever an Indian teller tells a story, the listeners respond with '*Hm hm*' sounds which tell him that they are truly listening; stories lose their verve without such responses. In public recitations of poetry (as in Urdu poetry festivals or *mushairas*) or musical performances, the members of the audience do not sit still but shake their heads, keep time with their hands, and exclaim words of appreciation, like '*vāh-vāh*', somewhat like 'wow!' As in the tale above, the listener is, for the time being, lower in status than the teller: in all situations, the giver is higher than the receiver, whether the thing given be food or knowledge or tales.

Sometimes a story goes in search of an audience. In a particular kind of ritual tale called *vratakathā*, the tale is part of the ritual. Such tales often describe the ritual and the beneficial results that come from performing it. So in *vratakathās*, the ritual is part of the story and the story is part of the ritual performance. For it is part of the ritual duty on that day to tell the story to anyone who will listen. Usually, the family and

neighbours gather to hear it. But in the following Telugu *vratakathā*, an old woman's story goes-a-begging.

A STORY GOES IN SEARCH OF AN AUDIENCE

Once on the day of *rathasaptamī*, the seventh day of the month of Māgha, when they take the temple chariot in procession through the streets, an old lady took a ritual bath from head to toe and performed a *pūjā*.

She had to tell someone the story of the sun god on that Sunday in the month of Māgha: that was part of her observance of the day's ritual. So she took a handful of rice coloured yellow with turmeric and set out to find someone to whom she could give the sanctified rice and tell the story. But everyone she met was in too much of a hurry.

Her sons were hurrying to the court of the local king. It was already getting late and they didn't want the king to scold them. When her sons refused to listen to her story, she went in search of her grandsons. It was time for them to go to school, and they didn't want to listen to the old woman's story. When she went to her daughter-in-law, she said she was too busy because she had to attend to her baby.

The old woman then went out of the house to the women who were washing clothes on the riverbank and asked them to lend their ears to her story for the Sundays in the month of Māgha. As they had just finished their morning's work and were in a hurry to get home, they too refused. Wherever she went, whomsoever she approached, she couldn't find a single listener. Brahmans, woodcutters, basket weavers, washermen, potters—not one of them was willing to set a few minutes aside to listen to her story.

As a consequence, all these people who refused to listen to her story for the Sundays of Māgha suffered. Her sons were punished at court; her daughter-in-law soon found that her baby was deathly ill; her grandsons were beaten by their teachers at school; the women at the river were roundly abused by their mothers-in-law; the brahman could find no one to feed him that day; for some inexplicable reason, splinters went into the basket makers' fingers; and, try as they would, not a pot would come out right on the potters' wheels that day.

The old woman didn't know any of this. She was sad that she could find no one to listen to her story, but she was patient. She finally went to the back streets and found a pregnant woman of the salt-seller caste who said she would listen to the woman's story but that she was terribly hungry. The poor woman said she had to have some *pāyasam* first. She wanted it made with milk and sugar and a full measure of rice because she was very, very hungry. The old woman went home, made a full measure of sweet pudding, and brought it to the pregnant woman. The woman was very happy and ate it all. But before the old woman could begin the story, she was fast asleep. While she slept like this, without a thought in the world, the old woman just waited, the ritual rice in her hand. Suddenly she heard the child in the womb of the pregnant woman say to her, 'Why don't you tell *me* the story? I will listen to it. Put the grains of rice in my mother's navel and tell me the story.'

The old woman was delighted. She carefully filled the sleeping woman's navel with ritual rice. Then she told the round belly in front of her and the baby within it, her story for the Sundays in the month of Māgha. After she finished her story, she sang a lullaby that said, 'Wherever you go, deserted villages will become prosperous towns, cotton-seeds will become pearls, dry trees will become covered with fruit, even old cows will give milk, barren women will have children, lost jewels will be found and dead men will come back to life. O baby, you'll have such powers as will make a king's heart glad.'

By the time she had finished her story and her song, the salt-seller woman woke up from her sleep. She was now willing to hear her story. But the old woman said, 'The baby in your womb listened to my story and it will have a good life. Send me word when your child is born and let me know whether it's a boy or a girl.' And then she went home.

A few weeks later, the woman got news that the poor salt-seller woman was delivered of a girl. The old woman hastened to the salt-sellers' street with a sari and a small beaked cup with castor oil and medicines, all the things that one gives to a newborn baby. With the sari, she made a hammock for the baby, tied the hammock to a branch of a tree in a nearby forest, put the baby in it, and asked the trees to rock it like a cradle and begged the birds to sing the lullaby. Now the child's mother was free to go about her business during the day and earn her living while the trees and birds looked after the baby. The old woman then went home.

Around that time, the king of the country happened to pass through the forest. He heard the songs of the birds and the wailing of a small child. He was curious and looked around till he found the hammock and the birds singing a lullaby all around it. The birds said to the king, 'This little girl is your wife and our mother. Take her home with you, and marry her when she grows up.'

So he put the child in a palanquin and took her along with him. When they passed through a deserted village, it became a beautiful, bustling town. On their way, they rested in a cotton field, and all the cotton-seeds became pearls. In the poor village they passed, old cows began to give milk and dry trees sprouted green leaves and were soon covered with fruit. And in his palace, the king's wife, who had been barren all this while, was blessed with a child that year.

The salt-seller's baby grew into a little girl and soon into a young woman, bringing year after year new riches to the kingdom. At an appropriate time, the king married her.

As you can imagine, the older wife was not at all pleased and was mad with jealousy at the attention given to the beautiful young queen who had come from nowhere into the palace.

One day, in a fit of jealousy, she gathered all the precious jewels in the palace,

put them in a box, and had it thrown into the sea. Sometime later, a fisherman caught an enormous fish, brought it to the palace, and presented it to the older queen. She turned up her nose at it, complained of its stench, and sent it scornfully to the younger queen, who was so delighted with it that she personally supervised its cooking. When the cooks cut it open, they found the box of jewels that the older queen had cast into the sea. The king came to hear of it, and he at once remembered the lullaby the birds had sung that listed the wonderful things this young woman would bring about. He had seen with his own eyes that most of these things had come to pass. Deserted villages had turned to beautiful towns, cottonseeds had turned to pearls, old cows had flowed with milk, and dry trees had borne fruit. And now a lost chest of jewels had been miraculously recovered. Only one thing was left. He meant to test the last of the young queen's powers—the power to give life to the dead. So he dined in his young queen's quarters and then he moved to his older wife's bedchamber, where he secretly took poison and fell dead.

The elder wife was distraught and sent for the younger one to come and join her in committing *sati* on the husband's funeral pyre. While the body was being made ready for the cremation, the young queen prepared herself to join her husband in death. While she was doing so, a brahman came to her and asked for water to wash his feet. He also asked the young queen to wash her own feet. Then he asked for a drink of water, and asked her to drink some water herself. He told her to make arrangements for him to have a bath from head to toe and for her to do the same. He asked for sandalwood paste for his body, and asked her to smear turmeric on hers. After that he took some *kumkum* (vermillion) and made a caste-mark on his forehead, and asked her to smear a dot of *kumkum* on hers. Then he asked to be fed a meal, and asked her to eat too. After that he asked for betel nut and betel leaf to mark the end of the meal and of the ritual, and asked her to take betel nut and betel leaf for herself. Thus he made her do everything he himself as a brahman would do. All the while the young queen was grieving and in a hurry to go to the cremation ground where her husband's body was waiting to be cremated. But the brahman did not let her leave till she had done all that he said she should do. At the end of it all, she asked him who he was. He said he was Ādinārāyaṇa, the sun god about whom the old woman had told her the story when she was still in the womb, even before she was born. He gave her some rice colored with turmeric and told her to sprinkle it on her husband's body. Then he vanished.

The young queen rushed to the cremation ground with the rice in her hand. Everyone was waiting for her. She walked up quickly to the king's body and threw the rice on it. He woke up at once on his bed of firewood as if on a bed where he had fallen asleep. When he and everyone else asked how he had been revived so miraculously, she told them all that she had received these magical powers only by virtue of hearing the story for the Sundays of Māghamāsa even before she was born.

The king was astonished and said, 'If merely listening to that story can do such things, how much more effective would it be if people performed the ritual the story celebrates!' Then he ordered arrangements to be made for his wife to

perform the ritual (*vrata*). The same ritual that the queen performed that Sunday is followed to this day by the upper castes in this age of wicked Kali.

Note how the teller begins with her family, her sons, her youngest grandchildren, her daughter-in-law, and then moves outward—apparently to the high-caste people in her neighbourhood, then to the outer streets where lower castes like basket-makers live, till she finally comes to the outermost streets where the poor and lowest castes live. There, though she still cannot hold the attention of an adult listener, she finds a captive audience in a baby still in the womb.

A tale effects changes. The people who refuse to listen are punished, and anyone who hears such a *vratakathā* becomes fortunate, acquires unusual powers like the young girl who can heal the sick, make a dry tree flower, restore lost treasure, and revive the dead. In Hindu texts, a *phala-śruti*, or 'recital of results', is part of the text: it tells you what good results will accrue if you read the text. The same is true of sacrifices, offerings to gods, pilgrimages and other ritual acts—people undertake them because they know that such observances, if properly concluded, will bring expected results, say, children to a barren couple or prosperity to a penniless family.

The recitation of texts is undertaken or arranged for specific purposes. At the end of every ten verses of the *Tiruvāymoḻi*, the most important of Śrivaiṣṇava poems recited in the temple and in the home, an eleventh verse tells the devotees the results of the recitation:

Anyone at all
learning these ten good verses
out of a thousand
made by our poet,
one of the many minions
of our lord
who lifted the mountain—
he will be a winner
several times over.[6]

A *vratakathā*, which is part of a ritual, has built into it such efficacy. The ritual is not complete unless the person performing it, here the old woman, tells the story of the ritual to a listener. And the effects of the story are magical, inevitable.

Other tales talk about the relation between the speaker and the audience.

The itinerant preacher and storyteller was holding forth to a village audience. One peasant particularly seemed to be moved to tears by his stories. So he asked him at the end of the performance, 'You seem to have been particularly touched

by the stories.' The peasant replied, 'Yes, sir, as I looked at you I was so strongly reminded of my favourite goat that died last month.'

But what happens when you really listen to a great story like the *Rāmāyaṇa*? Strange and magical things could happen, ordinary barriers could be broken, and one might walk through the looking glass as in this tale from Telugu.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU REALLY LISTEN

A villager who had no sense of culture and no interest in it was married to a woman who was very cultured. She tried various ways of cultivating his taste for the higher things of life, but he just wasn't interested.

Once a great reciter of the grand epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, came to the village. Every evening he would sing, recite, and explain the verses of the epic. The whole village went to this one-man performance as if it were a rare feast.

The woman who was married to the uncultured dolt tried to interest him in the performance. She nagged him and forced him to go and listen. This time, he grumbled as usual but decided to humour her. So he went in the evening and sat at the back. It was an all-night performance and he just couldn't keep awake. He slept through the night. Early in the morning, when a canto was over and the reciter sang the closing verses for the day, sweets were distributed according to custom. Someone put a few sweets into the mouth of the sleeping man. He woke up soon after and went home. His wife was delighted that her husband had stayed through the night and asked him eagerly how he enjoyed the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He said, 'It was very sweet.' The wife was happy to hear it.

The next day his wife insisted on his listening to the epic. So he went to the enclosure where the reciter was performing, sat against a wall, and before long fell fast asleep. The place was crowded, and a young boy sat on his shoulder and made himself comfortable and listened open-mouthed to the fascinating story. In the morning, when the night's portion of the story came to an end, everyone got up and so did the husband. The boy had got up earlier, but the man felt aches and pains from the weight he had borne all night. When he went home his wife asked him eagerly how it was. He said, 'It got heavier and heavier by morning.' The wife said, 'That's the way that story is.' She was happy that her husband was at last beginning to feel the emotions and the greatness of the epic.

On the third day, he sat at the edge of the crowd and was so sleepy that he lay down on the floor and even snored. Early in the morning, a dog came and pissed into his mouth just before he woke up and went home. When his wife asked him how it was, he moved his head this way and that, made a face, and said, 'Terrible. It was so salty.' His wife knew something was wrong, asked him what exactly happened, and didn't let up till he finally told her how he had been sleeping through the performance every night.

On the fourth day, his wife went with him. She sat down in the very first row and told him sternly that he should keep awake no matter what happened. So he sat dutifully in the front row and began to listen. Very soon, he was caught up in the adventures and the characters of the great epic story. On that day, the reciter was enchanting the audience with the story of Hanumān the monkey and how he had to leap across the ocean to take Rāma's signet ring to Sītā, the abducted wife of Rāma. When Hanumān was making the leap, the signet ring slipped from his hand and fell into the ocean. Hanumān didn't know what to do. He had to get the ring back quickly and take it to Sītā in the demon's kingdom. While he was wringing his hands, the husband, who was listening with rapt attention in the first row, said, 'Hanumān, don't worry, I'll get it for you.' Then he jumped up and dived into the ocean, found the ring on the ocean floor, and brought it back and gave it to Hanumān.

Everyone was astonished. They thought this man was someone special, really blessed by Rāma and Hanumān. Ever since, he has been respected in the village as a wise elder, and he has also behaved like one. That's what happens when you really listen to a story, especially the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

EARLY TEXTS

Written Indian texts, like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, often begin with a story about themselves, and it tends to be about the conversion of an oral tale into a written text. For Indian epics are intermediate forms with many of the properties of the oral genre—formulas, repetition at different levels as a key device, story within a story and so forth. They even have tellers and listeners inscribed within the tale. Their narrative ideals are often still those of the oral tellers, for they are writing in a world dominated by the oral. For instance, Kumāravyāsa (circa fifteenth century) opens his Kannada *Mahābhārata* with the following claims about his work:

> *padavittalipadondaggalike,*
> *kantapatrada uluhu kedadondaggalike*
> 'the virtue of never erasing a word once put down, the virtue of never breaking
> the continuous sound of the stylus on the palm leaf . . .'

These virtues are obviously not those of a writer but of an oral teller, who practises continuous unbroken narration, who cannot return to edit and correct the errors of his spoken words as a writer can. Early writers like Kumāravyāsa are close to the oral tradition and write to be recited aloud. Thus, the opposition between the oral and the written is not a simple either/or opposition, but involves many intermediate forms, a whole scale of forms.

The written texts, too, have stories about themselves: for instance, the *Mahābhārata* has a story about how it got to be written down. Vyāsa, the poet/editor of the epic, wanted someone to take down the words as he composed it orally. As it was a horrendous task (the epic is eight times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined), no one dared to come forward. Finally, Gaṇeśa, the elephant-faced god, offered to be the scribe, on the condition that Vyāsa should never keep him waiting, that the dictation should be as fast as Gaṇeśa could write. Vyāsa agreed. But, as the folk version says, Gaṇeśa was a god but Vyāsa was only a mortal who had to answer calls of nature from time to time. He also had sometimes to think a little to choose the right word. So, every now and then, he would throw in a difficult word that Gaṇeśa could not figure out, and while he was struggling with it, he would take his break. That is the explanation given for the presence of difficult words (*granthi*, or 'knots') in the normally simple epic Sanskrit of the *Mahābhārata*. As scholars of oral traditions have pointed out, archaic words are part of the epic style—Homer has words that were long out-of-date in his own time, and so do the African bards, probably inherited from earlier tellers and kept for their archaic effects and for the prestige of their antiquity.

The *Kathāsaritasāgara*, the eleventh-century Sanskrit reworking of oral tales, opens with another interesting story of its own origin: Pārvatī, Lord Śiva's consort, wants to hear a story from him, a story that has never been told to anyone else in the world. He complies. One of Śiva's minions conceals himself as a bee in the bedchamber ('a fly on the wall'), gets out, and tells Śiva's story to his wife, who of course can't help telling it to others. One of her own maids unwittingly tells the story back to Pārvatī, who is furious with Śiva for having told her a story that everyone knew. Śiva soon finds out how the story was leaked, and condemns his guilty henchman to become a *piśāca*, literally a ghost—to be released from that state only when he writes down Śiva's story. He does so in a forest—where he has no writing materials—with his own blood on the leaves of trees. When he sends this bloody 'manuscript' to the nearby king, the king is disgusted and rejects the work. So, heartbroken, the poet reads it to the birds and the beasts of the forest before he tears up the leaves. The king hears of this self-destructive act, rushes to the forest, and rescues what is left of the stories—a mere fragment of the original.

The narrative thinking in this story suggests that no story can be a secret. It cannot be hoarded within the four walls of a room; somebody, if only a fly on the wall, will hear it and tell it to others. An oral tale has multiple existences, lives on the lips of tellers, passes from person to person, generation to generation. So there is no such thing as a unique story—only a chain of variants of an original that has been lost in the variety of its offspring. Furthermore, the language of an oral tale is *piśāca*-language (ghost language, *paiśācī*, which is one of the dialectal variants of Sanskrit), not a standard language but a colloquial substandard dialect, because it is told by ordinary men and women. Though professional bards may embellish it with stylistic ornamentations, an oral folktale is usually told by non-professionals in the speech forms of their time and place. Such tellers are often illiterate, and they tell their tales in domestic contexts with children in the audience.

It is ironic that the culprit who overhears the secret story is cursed to fall to earth and become a lowborn tribal, to be released only when he writes the story and disseminates it to unknown others, beginning even with birds and beasts. He has to make it his own, with blood for ink and leaves for pages (converting natural givens into cultural artifacts), just as he turns the oral into the written, changing an ephemeral but living medium into a more lasting, frozen one.

Early texts were usually published not by being written down and read silently, but by being read aloud to an appreciative audience, a patron, a court. When the poet, Guṇāḍhya, cannot find such a patron, he reads it to the birds and beasts—reconverting the written into the oral, as early writing was meant to be. In early stages of writing, it was an *aide-memoire*; to write was to write down, to read was to read aloud. The words are dormant on the leaf or the page waiting to be awakened by a living voice. The king at first is disgusted by the blood, unable to see the ink in the blood, the words in the cry of suffering. But once he learns to see it, he rescues the work or what is left of it.

That what we have inherited is only a small part of what was originally composed is expressed in legend after legend regarding texts as well as oral compositions. For instance, the Vedas are supposed to have been stolen and hidden away in the sea by a demon. Viṣṇu takes the form of a boar and kills the demon, thereby restoring the Vedas to the human world. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, according to a folk legend sometimes also found in texts, was composed originally by Hanumān, the learned monkey and henchman of Rāma, after the great battle in which he was part of the action. But learned though he was, he was still a monkey, so he scattered his writings playfully and perversely on a mountain—what we have is only a fragment. Collectors and tellers who are the active bearers of oral

traditions conserve only a small part of what's actually produced. Earlier, written traditions also shared the same fate. An old Tamil saying has it that all five elements, earth, air, water, fire and ether, along with insects, are the enemies of written texts.

THE COMMUNITY OF LISTENERS

I mentioned above that both oral and early written texts were 'published' only when they were presented to a worthy audience. How this audience is constituted into a 'textual community', one that both holds and is held together by a text like the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the Bible, is the fascinating subject of another folk legend regarding the Tamil poet Kampan (circa eleventh century). The legend is also current in the Malayalam regions, where the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampan provides the text for the folk puppet theatre.[7] It was retold in Tamil in the nineteenth century in a text (*Vinotaracamancari*, by Virasami Cettiyar, 1896) that recorded many such oral materials. I shall retell only a small portion of the poet's legend.

The Cola king was persuaded that Kampan should be commissioned to write an epic *Rāmāyaṇa* in Tamil. He shrewdly thought that if he asked a rival poet (Ottakkuttan) to write another *Rāmāyaṇa* at the same time, the rivalry would produce excellent work. So he asked both poets to compose the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Ottakkuttan was very diligent and methodical and began work at once, while Kampan whiled away his time in pleasure. When Ottakkuttan had already composed five whole cantos of the epic, Kampan had produced nothing at all. But when the king summoned and asked him how much he had composed, he lied and said, 'A little more than five cantos,' not to be outdone by his rival. The king asked Kampan to recite one of his latest verses. Kampan composed orally a masterly impromptu verse on the spot, which pleased the king. But his rival, who was an acute critic, found that Kampan had used the word *tumi*, which no one had heard before. He challenged Kampan on that word. Kampan had indeed made an error, for it was a nonexistent word. But not fazed by his rival's challenge, Kampan said, 'That's a dialect word. You'll hear it among cowherds.' His rival wanted proof. So Kampan said, 'Come tomorrow morning to the cowherd colony and I'll give you proof.' Then he was panic-stricken, for he knew that there was no such word. He prayed to the goddess of learning, saying, 'O goddess, by your grace I'm a poet. I need to show that the word *tumi* is indeed in the Tamil language. Don't let me down.' The goddess took pity on her favourite and said, 'Come tomorrow to the cowherd colony with the king and your rival Ottakkuttan at such and such an hour.' The next morning the goddess took the form of a cowherd woman, and the arts and sciences at her command took the form of her many children: they all stayed in a hut in the cowherd colony. When Kampan brought his king and rival toward the hut, they heard the cowherd woman warn her children not to spill the *tumi*. The king and rival were amazed at Kampan's range of vocabulary. But when later the rival went to check, the hut and the cowherd woman and her children had all vanished. But the word *tumi* had become part of the language.

Thus a poet brings into the language not only archaic forgotten words but neologisms, invented forms that no one has ever heard before.

After Kampan had composed his *Rāmāyaṇa*, he wanted it to be accepted in a public ceremony at the Viṣṇu temple in Śrirangam. When he went with his palm-leaf manuscript, the priests there said, 'Unfortunately you've written in Tamil, and not in Sanskrit, the language of the gods. We are not competent to judge Tamil works. But the 3,000 scholars devoted to Śiva in Cidambaram, the great temple city and center of pilgrimages, are experts in Tamil. If you'll get their approval, we'll be happy to accept it.' So the poet went to Cidambaram, but how was he going to get the approval of all 3,000 scholars? He sought them out one after another, but they eluded him, put off meetings, and kept him waiting for months. He then prayed to Viṣṇu (of whom Rāma the epic hero is an incarnation) and pleaded with him: 'Here I am, with a complete *Rāmāyaṇa* in your honour. . . . Don't you want it to be published and accepted by people?' The god appeared and told him to go to the chief scholar's house the next morning, where he would find the entire community of 3,000 scholars assembled for the funeral of the chief scholar's son, who had died of snakebite. 'Tell them,' the god advised, 'that you will revive the child with recitations from your poem. Go now.'

When, the next morning, he went to the chief scholar's house, his son was indeed lying dead of snakebite, and the 3,000 scholars were assembled. When Kampan asked them to look at his epic, they were outraged. 'Now? When our chief scholar's own son is lying there dead?' Kampan pretended he had just heard about the tragedy. 'Oh, snakebite, is it? I know I can do something about it,' he said, and picked out the verses he had written about Lakṣmana (Rāma's brother), who was struck by a snake-arrow and revived by Hanumān's help. As he recited the verses, lo and behold, a cobra came from nowhere, sucked the poison from the boy's wound, and died in front of the assembly. The assembly was amazed by the powers of Kampan's poetry and only too delighted to listen to him. They enthusiastically endorsed his genius.

In this section, one is made aware of the shamanistic powers of poets and the magical or prophetic use of texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

There is more to the story. When Kampan went back to the Viṣṇu temple at Śrirangam, the priests were still not satisfied. They wanted him to get the approval of the Jain community, which he did, by showing them portions of his work that mentioned their doctrines. Then he was sent to a learned and ultra-critical courtesan whom he charmed with his verses. Thus, he was sent to different constituencies of his audience, and he showed that there was something in his work for every one of them. B,

these rounds, he was actually constructing his audience, carving out of the surrounding society a textual community that took his work to its heart. He demonstrated that his poem was a microcosm that represented within itself the entire community. Thus, the audience becomes part of the work.

CONCLUSION

I conclude this chapter with tales that break the code of tales, that affirm the narrative code by showing you what happens when you defy it, as in this example from Kannada.

A STORY TO END ALL STORIES

A king who loved stories was never satisfied and wanted more and more. He tired out all his tellers with his endless demands. He even sent the town crier with an announcement that he would pay any storyteller a thousand pieces of gold if he could make the king say, 'I've had enough.' Many storytellers tried and exhausted themselves.

One of these exhausted tellers met a clever friend on his way home from the palace. The friend heard of the king's challenge and said he knew a way to tire the king's attention.

The next day, he went to the palace and was shown to the king's chamber where he began his story: 'Once upon a time, a large flock of parrots sat on a tree. Right next to the tree was a field that had just been harvested. Grain lay in heaps all over the field. One of the parrots flew down, picked up a grain and flew back. Then the next parrot flew down, picked up a grain and flew back. Then the next parrot flew down, picked up a grain and flew back. . . .' He went on like this for hours. The king, according to the contract, had to nod and say '*Hm hm*,' to indicate he was listening. He was getting tired and sleepy. Finally, he asked, 'How long are you going to say that a parrot flew down, picked up a grain and flew back?' The teller answered, 'As long as there is grain left in the heaps, my lord.' Then he continued, 'Then another parrot flew down, picked up a grain, and flew back. Then another. . . .' The king could stand it no longer. He admitted defeat, gave the teller his thousand pieces of gold, and sent him home.

In this story, the king is really the greedy child who cannot have enough of stories and pesters the adult. Such stories are often told to tease (and please) children. They contradict some of the basic rules of the narrative contract. For instance, a narrative should have closure. As the queen in *Alice in Wonderland* said to Alice, 'Tell your story. Go on to the end. And then stop.' This is one of the unspoken contracts with the teller—that his story is finite, unlike reality. Indeed art and literature

make it their business (usually) to enclose in a finite form what is infinite and amorphous. Not only do they wish to see eternity in an hour, they wish to enclose it in an hour; they let you hold the world in your hand. For the map is not the territory. One is reminded of Borges's story about the map-makers who wanted to make a map that would represent everything in their country, every stone and every puddle. Each time they found something they had not included, even a measly bush, they enlarged the map, till the map was as large as the whole country. A story cannot be, should not be, coextensive with what is being narrated. Fiction and reality, discourse and its subject follow different rules. The former is finite, the latter is not—except in mock stories like these, though these too come to an end, albeit without a conclusion.

Another kind of endless story is the chain-tale, where the narrator entangles the listener in a double bind. In childhood, most Indians have heard the tease who begins a story as usual and then goes like this:

> Once upon a time, an old woman was crossing a river and she dropped her needle in the water.
> *Hm*, says the child.
> Will she get the needle back if you say '*hm*'?
> No.
> Will she get it back if you say 'No'?
> Then what shall I say?
> Will she get it if you say, 'What shall I say?'
> (Silence)
> Will she get it if you say nothing?

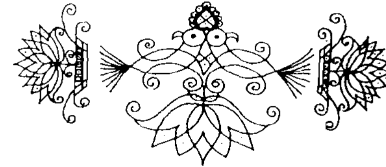
And so on, till the listening child begins to throw things or beat the delighted teller in utter, helpless exasperation. Such stories, too, violate the code of narrative by making the listener (outside the story) responsible for the fate of the characters (inside the story). This puts an end to the story without putting an end to the discourse: the end is exasperation, often tears of rage at being taken in.

I began by speaking of the importance of oral traditions for any serious inquiry into Indian culture, and how oral traditions have fed other media. Today, when nearly 30 per cent of even rural homes have access to electronic media and a bride's dowry often includes a television set, this new or secondary orality seriously modifies the primary oral world. But the new media, as we have shown, have incorporated oral traditions and made the local translocal. Such a 'nationalisation', especially in a country where radio and television are controlled by the state, has become a matter for national debate. Still, one hopes that in India, as

elsewhere, the electronic media will serve human ends by decentralising and democratising knowledge and the arts. Oral narratives of every kind are part of being human, as the following parable suggests.

A man wanted to know about mind, not in nature, but in his private, large computer. He asked it (no doubt in the best Fortran), 'Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?' The machine set to work to analyse its own computational habits. Finally, the machine printed its answer on a piece of paper, as such machines do. The man ran to get the answer and found, neatly typed, the words: THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY.[5]

Two Realms of Kannada Folklore



GENRE AND SYSTEM

Returning to Kannada folklore after several years of studying classical Tamil poetry, I saw a particularly simple and striking pattern I had not seen before. It is probably obvious, once mentioned, but I think it is a significant pattern and may help us look at a folklore system in one village.

For system it is, where each genre is related to others, fitted, dovetailed, contrasted—so that we cannot study any of them alone for long. For example, Kannada riddles complement Kannada proverbs in various ways. The riddles have no social themes, as proverbs have. The riddles concentrate on familiar objects of nature (water, sun, eyes, tree, eggs, etc.) or culture (well, book, sickle, etc.) and play poetic and logical games with them. The genre is favoured by children around five or six years of age when they are trying out logical operations.[1] Here is a common Kannada riddle: 'What has three eyes but is not Śiva?' Answer: 'A coconut.'

Proverbs, on the other hand, the 'portable paradigms' of a society, mention objects of nature or culture not for their poetic or logical value but to make a didactic point or to illustrate a belief. Here is an example: 'One bunch for the banana tree, one pregnancy for the scorpion'—it is believed that a banana tree dies after one crop, and a scorpion dies after it gives birth to baby scorpions by bursting its back. These images are used in the proverb to talk about any single and deadly achievement—say, a writer who dies after one book. Children of five to six years do not attend to proverbs, though the adults around them may use them all the time. Proverbs enter the repertory of a person only after he is an adolescent. A child using a proverb would be playing the adult, talking big; he would be rebuked for doing so. Thus, proverb and riddle complement each other in their universes of discourse as well as in their functions. Similarly, one

may think of folktale and myth, grandmother's tale and bardic narratives, ritual and theatre, non-literate traditions and literary ones as complementary, context-sensitive parts of one system. In the present essay, I wish to suggest one aspect of such a system.

In what follows, I consider in some detail contrasted pairs of examples: domestic and public tellings of the 'same' tale, folktales and myths, folk myths and classical myths, classical myths and their folk versions, village ritual and village theatre. The contrasts in each case define and illustrate a facet of the contrasts between domestic and public settings. I shall also relate the domestic/public contrast to the ancient Dravidian categories of *akam* and *puṟam*, which are particularly and most spectacularly developed in classical Tamil poetry. I shall try to develop an argument chiefly through the close analysis of full excerpts from folk texts, not of summaries. The intention is also to present samples of the rich materials collected by my folklorist colleagues in the Kannada area.

TALES AND TELLERS: DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC

Some years ago, I found two versions, one told by a grandmother at home and another by a bard in public, of what I knew as the same tale (type 707, 'The Three Golden Sons'). In this tale, a king has five (or seven, or one hundred and one) queens, and all of them are childless. The king, one day, finds and marries an unknown young woman, who bears him a child. The domestic version, as the grandmother told it, opened this way:

> There was a king. The king had five wives. He was fearfully rich. He used to eat from a golden plate, drink from a silver pitcher. Even though he was rich, he was sad because he had no children.

When the 'same' tale is told by a professional, it takes him a whole hour or more to cover what the grandmother said in half a minute.[2] With cymbals in his hand and a choral assistant next to him, he first offers a prayer to Śiva, and requests him (as well as the audience) not to mind his errors:

> We know little, we are not learned.
> Correct our errors, lord,
> Accept them, lord.
> We bow to you a thousand times.

Then they dance. The lead man offers more prayers to elders and *gurus*, and asks Śiva to allow him to begin the story. Then he sings:

> What we have before us is a beautiful city.
> A city named Chandravati, a beautiful city.
> *Ē, guḍuguḍu dhiḍayya!* (Refrain)

The cymbals and the singing stop. He turns to his assistant, pats him on the shoulder, and begins a prose exchange:

> '*Ē*, son, listen.'
> 'Yes, sir, my *guru*.'
> 'Chandravati, Chandravatī was the city.'
> 'Yes, that's so, sir.'
> 'Look, my boy, look at Chandravatī.'
> 'Is *that* the city, my *guru*?'
> 'Carved in stone is the fort,'
> 'Decorated with pearls,'
> 'How can one describe the fort?'

Then he describes the streets, the colonies of different communities, and their riches, gold and diamonds. King Caduraṅgarāya reigns there in justice. Though he is good, Śiva has given him no offspring, no bud on his family tree. All his five queens are full of sorrow, wash their hands in tears. Once he has to tour and inspect remote parts of his country. When he leaves with his retinue and troops, Śiva appears at the palace door as an old holy man. He is described in detail in a song. The five queens are excited by his presence. They wash his feet in rosewater poured from golden pitchers, wave incense and lamps before him. But when they bring him sweets and dishes in a large platter, the holy man turns away, saying,

> No, no, I will not,
> I will not take food,
> I will not take food
> from barren hands.
> No, no, I will not.

He leaves abruptly, rejecting the offerings of the five lovely queens of the realm, who are desolate over their barrenness. They take to bed in the women's quarters on a row of cots. When the king returns from his journey, he finds them fasting, in tears, ready to give up their lives. Then he goes on a quest, finds Kāḍasiddamma, his future queen, alone in a temple. Then the singers tell us her entire past history, with the names of her parents, their kingdom, and so forth.

Such details should be enough to convey a sense of the differences between the two versions of the tale. Let me point to one: in the grandmother's tale, no character or place is ever named; in the bardic version,

all the characters and places have names, even the midwife—all except the five queens, who later turn jealous and wicked. They are characterised by an amorphous anonymity in the midst of all the names in this version. This reminds one of an ancient Tamil convention: in *akam* poetry no names should be mentioned, as they may be in *puṟam* poetry.

Akam means 'interior', *puṟam*, 'exterior'. *Akam* also means 'house.' We may here borrow these ancient South Dravidian terms to describe the settings of Kannada folklore.[3] The grandmother's folktale was told within the house; she is a housewife, the audience is the family. Her tale not only does not have names, but does not offer apologies to a cosmic god, or formally greet a public audience—as the bardic tellings do. Furthermore, throughout the bardic narration, the main teller is followed by an assistant, an 'answerer', who holds a dialogue with him, asks him questions, and sings with him his responses, often entire songs. The 'answerer' behaves as a representative of the audience, dwelling on the appropriate emotions, expressing (and increasing) their suspense, exclaiming in joy, crying out in horror or consoling the teller when he seems too distraught by tragic events to continue. Like canned laughter or applause on American TV, he tends to guide or give cues to the audience to respond in certain ways. He helps to include and interiorise the public within the performance.

We are struck by other concomitant differences when we compare the *akam* or domestic tale with the public or *puṟam* one. All the components of a Jakobsonian 'communication diagram' vary with the setting of the tale: teller, audience, media, structure, texture (or style), and so forth.[4] For instance, the language of the domestic tale is close to ordinary speech, heightened or lightened occasionally by the talent of the granny.[5] Some domestic tellers may borrow a colorful phrase or formula from the public tellers, and may even borrow from the public ('public' includes 'literary') versions a name or two—but such names are infrequent (as they are in classical *akam* poetry). The style is swift, the diction racy, dialectal. The narrative rarely digresses or elaborates. (There are, of course, minor variations, depending on the teller's temperament.) The bard's language, on the other hand, is formulaic, professionally learned, not only in phrasing but in entire descriptions of named cities, gods, persons, or feats, punctuated by verses sung alone or in chorus; the bard may also use ordinary speech as occasion requires. As we thus move from *akam* to different grades of *puṟam* contexts, the language and technique of the telling become increasingly formal, varied, and complex. We move increasingly from a free-phrase genre toward a fixed-phrase one. The

complexity of the latter can include the styles of the former, not vice versa.

We may thus speak of an *akam-puṟam*, or domestic-public spectrum of folk genres in a Kannada village: the grandmother telling her tale in a kitchen while feeding the children (Kannada tales are food-time, not bed-time, stories) is the most *akam*, 'interior, private, familial', in terms of teller and audience. Then we have grades of *puṟam*, or public-ness: there are single professional singers and tellers; or one with an assistant, or with a small group; finally, a theatrical troupe. Theatre, the end-point in the continuum, is the most '*puṟam*, exterior or public' of the genres.[6]

The spectrum shows also a gradation in various elements of performance. A domestic teller uses no props—her voice is her only instrument. As we move toward the *puṟam* end, the props which give the bard a public presence increase. Even when the bard sings alone, he is strikingly costumed, and carries a gong or a cymbal to accompany his recitations. His medium is not merely prose speech: he sings, he mimes, he dances. Actually, as among classical Tamil bards, his professional name is linked to his instrument: *cauḍikeyavaru*, 'those who carry a *cauḍike* or stringed lute', *kamsāḷeyavaru*, 'those who use *kamsāḷe* or metallic cymbals'. He and his performance are linked to a myth and a public cult; his musical instrument is a sacred object, often representing a character in the very myth he sings. The *gondaliga* singers devoted to the goddess Ellamma think of their lute (*cauḍike*) as made out of the villain Kārtavīrya's body. Where the singer is accompanied by assistants or background musicians, we see a graded complexity of instrumental accompaniments: cymbals, lutes, drums, a chorus of voices and combinations of these. The props may extend to pictures, specialised puppet-sets or even animals. (I know of one troupe that uses cows and calves to play Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā.) These accompaniments attain their fullest development in the village theatre: a prepared stage, lighting, makeup, costume, many actors and a stage manager, often a script.[7] Furthermore, the theatre is paralleled by another cultural performance, that of public ritual, on which it is closely modelled (see below, final section).

In the domestic setting, anyone with a taste for it can be a teller; there are not restrictions of caste, class, religious affiliation or initiation, or even gender (though, as a rule, women are the tale-tellers at home). As we move outward, we see that tellers are marked by cult and caste (indicated by the sect marks on their faces and bodies, special headgear and costume, and special instruments). They specialise in a small number of elaborate tales, for which they are known. One such specialisation is in

caste-epics, which are confined to a caste, a locale, a calendrical ritual or festival, a myth of origins or ancestral heroes; the telling is often accompanied by rituals of possession and animal sacrifice. The professional bards have both sacred (*dhārmik*) and secular (*laukik*) tales to fit different occasions. A few who specialise only in the latter are usually not tied to a place or a region, but wander more widely afield; they also have a harder time finding steady patronage (Paramashivaiah 1971).

This brings us to the question of audience. As is obvious, the domestic tale has children for its direct audience. The audience widens as we go toward the *puṟam genres*—to the whole family and neighbours if it is a ritual tale (e.g., *vrata kathā*, as in Wadley) told or read by a male priest on a ritual occasion or by a woman for women. Or the telling may be addressed to a wider clan or caste-group when it is a caste-epic, or to a whole village and beyond (see Narayana Rao). If it is a more general or secular performance (like the *gondaliga* tales of northern Karnataka), it crosses even language and regional boundaries.

Let me now summarise the contrasting genres and add a few relevant facts. The two main settings are domestic and public, the topics may be sacred (*dhārmik*) or secular (*laukik*). The domestic genres are almost always told by women and consist of tales (secular) told to children, or women's ritual tales, *vrata kathā* (sacred), which, though told in a domestic setting, may have the whole family and some neighbours present. Women also sing ballads (like the tales of chaste women who died with their husbands, *māsatis*) or songs about mythological incidents, very often to themselves while bathing or cooking or to female audiences at weddings, and so forth. These latter, the ritual tales and the ballads, are domestic still, but are a step into the public genres in style (meter, literary diction, etc.), setting, and, often, audience.

Tales in the public setting are usually told by men, who may be either amateurs who perform for fun to small groups of friends, para-professionals who earn their living by other professions but specialise (usually) in a local epic or caste-epic and sing it at festivals, or professionals who are itinerant and have a repertory of both sacred and secular narratives. These last address the whole village community or composite groups at a regional festival.

The domestic genres are close to ordinary speech, whereas the public ones use special styles, formulaic prose, verse, song, dialogue as well as ordinary speech, accompanied by costume, assistants, instruments, props like pictures and puppets. The end-point of this spectrum is folk-theatre (see Fig. 1).

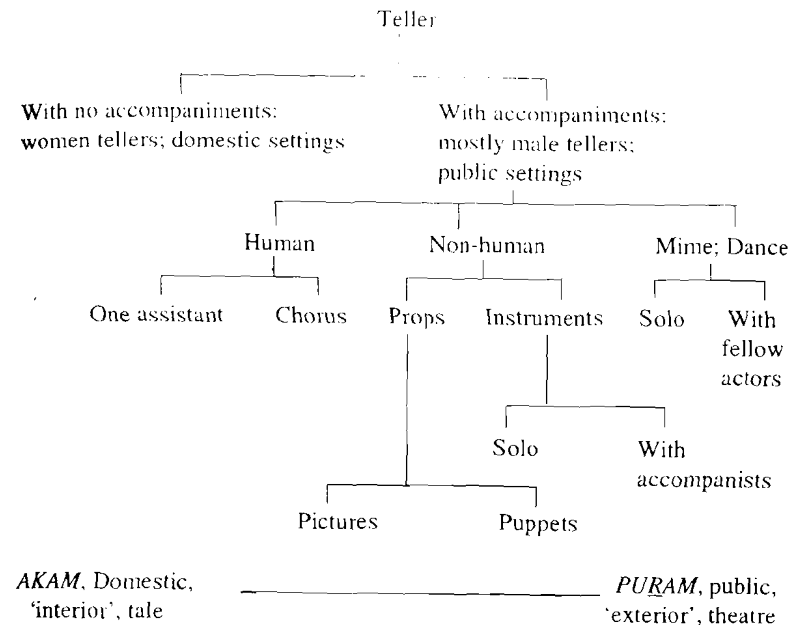


Fig. 1: A Continuum of Indian Folk Genres

That genres follow the lines drawn between the domestic and the public settings is not surprising to anyone familiar with Indian (in this case, Hindu) culture. Some version of this generic division is probably universal, but my details come from the Kannada area.[8] It must be emphasised, however, that the division, in Indian village society especially, is not between private and public, between personal and impersonal, but between the *domestic* and the *public*—between the inner circle or the immediate kin within the four (or more) walls of a house and the larger circles of the extended family, the subcaste, the caste and the society at large. The domestic-public gradations are seen also in the spatial access to the interiors of a house: intimacy and kin-bonds can be measured by how far one is allowed inside a house toward the kitchen. Compartmentalisation of life-ways into those appropriate for home and those appropriate for the world outside (say, office) is also relevant (Khare 1970). Rituals and priests, too, are divided between the domestic and the public realms (e.g., the house-priest and the temple-priest). The classical Tamil terms *akam* and *puṟam* express these (as well as other) dichotomies: *akam* means 'interior, heart, house/home', and so forth; *puṟam*

means 'exterior, outer parts of the body, outside the house', and so forth (for details, see Ramanujan 1967, 1985).

This division is, I think, signalled by the use and avoidance of names. Within the family, parents and elders are not usually called by names at all, but are given kin-terms like Appā, Ammā, Doḍḍappā—'Father,' 'Mother,' 'Big Uncle'. Sometimes short nicknames are affixed to some kin-terms, like uncle (e.g., Rāju Doḍḍappa, 'Big Uncle Rāju') when he has to be distinguished from other uncles. In traditional families, husbands and wives do not call each other by names; brides often change their names when they enter the in-laws' household. Children are called by diminutives or nicknames by siblings and elders. Full-fledged names become (as in other cultures) obligatory only in public and formal situations (e.g., school, office, legal matters). Gestures, clothing, language and manners change as well.

I am suggesting that these differences parallel the differences between a domestic and a public *telling*, which are also 'indexed' by the absence of names in the former and the presence of names in the latter. In the one thousand or so Kannada folktales I have looked at, hardly fifty have names in them, and most of the names can be traced to borrowings from public tellings (which include literary texts)—for example, Satire Kṛṣṇappā, Rājā Vikrama. Folktales, especially animal tales and comic tales, may have nicknames, such as Kāgakka, 'Sister Crow', or Peddambhatta, 'The Foolish Bhatta' (Bhatta is a suffix for a brahman name, often used as a nickname, pejoratively). It is also significant that when one asks informants to *write down* a story, many of them will insert names, for writing is a public medium; they also pepper the style with literary phrases and schoolbook grammatical forms in place of the original dialectal ones.

Much of this fits the old convention that no names should be mentioned in *akam* love poems. The reason given in the commentaries is that *akam*, or 'interior', themes are overtly archetypal, deal with typical character, situations, and landscapes, not with individuated persons and places. This generic characterisation also fits the domestic folktale very aptly.

FOLKTALE AND MYTH

The two realms of *akam* and *puṟam* connect and divide other folk genres as well, which have to be defined according to the meta-folklore of each cultural region. The lines between genres like proverb and riddle, folktale and myth are drawn or blurred differently in different cultures, though the genre-divisions seem to be universal. The same tale-type 707 may appear, as we have seen, with different textures and in different guises in the domestic and public realms; similarly, as we shall see, the same tale-type may function as a folktale (*ajjikate*, 'granny's tale') at home, a ritual tale (*vrata kathā*, story told as part of a ritual), or as a myth (*purāṇa*) with ancient classical texts attesting it. To put it in semiotic jargon, most of the signifiers may be the 'same', but what is signified may change. As in ordinary language, the proposition and the sentence structure may be the same in two utterances, but the speech act may be very different. The 'same' form may serve different functions, and will then be called by different genre-names. These shifts are part of the 'intertextuality', the interplay of different genres within a system. Kannada folktales and myths are related to each other in this way, as an example will make clear.

In my collections, I have a 'folktale', or *ajjikate*, a 'granny's tale', told by an old woman to her grandchildren.

> King Maduvarasa and Queen Mādalāmbe have no children.[9] So they do penance and pray to Śiva, who appears before them and gives them a choice: they can either have an idiotic son who will live to be a hundred or a smart son who will live only sixteen years. They choose the latter. Astrologers predict that a tiger will kill him. So the parents try to keep him from tigers. But on his sixteenth birthday he insists on going hunting, despite his mother's arguments, and kills several tigers. On his way back he enters a temple and sees in a picture a huge tiger that seems to leap at him out of the wall—and he dies of shock.
>
> His parents, advised by astrologers, want to get him married before they cremate him. They send out messengers with a cartload of gold to find a bride. A poor brahman with several daughters sells his daughter Cennamma to them. She marries the dead prince and goes, as both bride and widow at once, with him to the cremation ground. As his lawfully wedded wife, she refuses to leave his pyre. They light the funeral pyre; a great rainstorm strikes the place, and scatters the mourners. It is dark and she is left alone with the body. She makes a Bull out of clay [in another variant, out of her body dirt—obviously a very tiny Bull]. She uses the leaves and fruit and flowers on the dead man's bier to worship the Bull, who comes to life and grants the prince his life.

The story also occurs as part of a saint's legend in a sixteenth-century Kannada text, *Siṅgirājapurāṇa*, which claims a Sanskrit text, the *Skandapurāṇa*, as a precedent for the main story. Here is a summary of the textual version:

> In the north, there was a city named Pratyendrapura. Its king was Mahanta Cakrēśa. He had a young and only son. A day or two before his twelfth birthday, he died of snakebite. The king wished to get the dead prince married before cremating him, but the bride's parents refused. So he sent out his minions with an

offer of gold to anyone who would give their daughter in marriage to his son. No one came forward. But when they were taking the decorated bier, formed like a chariot, to the cremation ground, they met an old brahman with his seven- or eight-year-old daughter holding his hand. The brahman heard of the offer and said, 'I'll give my daughter for a thousand gold pieces, but on condition she will not be burned with the dead man.' The king agreed, gave him the gold, married the girl to his son's body, and took it to the cremation ground. But as he was lighting the pyre, a torrent of rain poured down and scattered the mourners. The decorated bier with the body fell into a pit of water. The terrified girl-bride embraced the body tightly. By midnight, the rain lessened. She was scared, but she remembered that it was the day for worshiping the Bull. She had fasted all day for it. Why be overcome by obstacles, she thought, and walked seven steps, scooped seven fistfuls of clay out of which she moulded a Bull. She used the flowers on the bier to worship the Bull, and uttered the proper prayers and begged, 'Father, accept my offerings. Grant my husband long life and prosperity.' When she put the ritual garland round the Bull's neck, the Bull, pleased with her devotion and innocence, gave life to the dead prince, who sat up and looked around at the ten directions, the firewood, the cremation ground, the dark rainy night. In answer to his question 'What are these strange things? What's this Bull worship, who's this young girl?' she bowed to him and explained, 'I'm your wife. Your people married us on your fresh bier.' He lifted her up saying, 'You've given me life,' and prostrated himself before the clay Bull. At once the decorated bier-chariot became a jewelled palace, the corpse's shroud became auspicious clothes and ornaments. Meanwhile, as the parents and the mourners were bemoaning the fact that the boy and the girl were left alone, the servants came to tell them of the jewelled palace and the prince who had returned to life. They ran to the place and embraced their son and daughter-in-law. Everyone celebrated the happy event with praises and shouts. The king and queen renamed their reborn son Vṛṣabhēndra (Lord of Bulls). They built a new town there, named Upēndrapura (City of the Young Lord).[10]

This is the story describing the fruits of the Bull Ritual (*Vṛṣabha Nōmpi*), which is performed according to the same text in the following way. After a ritual fast and bath, the devotee decorates a Bull-image with golden horns, hooves and forehead-ornaments; garlands it, circumambulates it, with the wish for a son firmly held in her mind. . . . She should hold ritual rice (*akṣate*) in her hands, close her eyes and visualise the Bull's image in her mind's eye, and listen to the story (as given above). Then she places the ritual rice on the Bull's feet, gives it holy water, chants silently His names, and asks aloud for the gift of a son.

Now, the *Siṅgirājapurāṇa* tells the story as part of the birth story of the Vīraśaiva saint, Basavaṇṇa. His mother, Mādalāmbike, heard it as part of the Bull Ritual. After worshipping the Bull in the prescribed manner and listening to the story, she opened her mouth to ask for the gift of a son, when the Bull entered her womb. Hence, the name of her saintly son is Basava ('Bull,' from Sanskrit *Vṛṣabha*).

Here the story functions as a *myth*. Associated with a ritual, it is a programme for mimetic behaviour: it invites the listener also to make the Bull image and worship it in the belief that what happens to a mythic character can happen to the worshipful listener. It offers a myth, a supernatural origin for the saint and his name. And, of course, as in a *puṟam* genre, all the characters have names or acquire them: Mādalāmbike and Basavaṇṇa are also part of a real history and society, as the characters in classical *puṟam* poems are.

Now if this same story is told by a ritual specialist in a special public ceremony on a day of *vrata* (or *nōmpi*), it is then called a *vrata kathā*, a ritual tale. We can see here a structural characteristic of such ritual tales—their reflexivity. The ritual (of Bull worship) is described as an incident within the *Siṅgirājapurāṇa* variant of the tale, and its efficacy is enacted: the boon of life is granted to a dead prince in the tale, and a child is granted to the worshipper. And the entire tale is, in turn, an important part of the Bull Ritual performed outside the tale. Ritual tales thus have a ritual within a tale, and the tale within the ritual. The grandmother's tale does not have this special structural property.

We also know a myth by its *puṟam* characteristics: names of places, persons, a public function, a performance to a special audience which may include the family but transcends it. Its conventions, its being thought ancient (*purāṇa*), embedded in an old Kannada metrical text (which says *its* original was a Sanskrit text), as well as its currency on a ritual occasion known for its present efficacy—all these characteristics of myth, no less than its attested historicity, mark a belief in its truth. These features and the attendant aura are not part of the domestic folktale, an *akam* genre. But they are part of a *vrata kathā*, a ritual tale, which is an intermediate form between a 'myth' and a 'granny tale'.

One more complex relation between *akam* and *puṟam* should be mentioned. I said above that a myth (*purāṇa*) is known by its *puṟam* or public characteristics. Even when a mythic god like Kṛṣṇa appears as a naughty child or a playboy-lover (both domestic, *akam* themes), one is never allowed to forget that he is a hero, a god, with public cosmic functions. Even as a child he battles with enemies; even in his naughtiness or love-play he suddenly reveals his divinity. Hundreds of poems and scores of myths take this paradox for a theme, for his divinity is the ultimate *puṟam*, the beyond, though he may also be in an *akam*, a house or a heart. He is

both within and without, both ultimate and intimate.[11] Here is one example: in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (10.8.37–9), Yaśodā inspects the mouth of her naughty little son, Kṛṣṇa, to see whether he has eaten mud. When she forces him to open his mouth,

There she saw the universe with all that moves and does not,
and the sky, and the directions,
with mountains, continents, oceans, and the globe of earth,
the wind and lightning, the moon and stars, the zodiac, water, fire,
wind, and ether,
the *manas*, elementary matter, and the three strands.
This wondrous sight she beheld in the body of her son
as she looked into His open mouth
together with the distinctions
of souls, times, natures, actions, desires, and gender.
And she saw there the village with herself,
and she could not believe her eyes. (Hart 1975, vi)

FOLK MYTHS AND CLASSICAL MYTHS: THE GODDESS REVISITED

In Kannada villages (and elsewhere), one finds what one may call folk-mythologies: they parallel, overlap, or rework standard Sanskritic myths. Oppert (1893), Elmore (1915), Whitehead (1921), and others pioneered the study of these stories about village gods and goddesses. Caste- or festival-related oral epics, mentioned earlier, are part of this body of narratives, accompanied by rituals of possession and animal sacrifice. Of these, one group, the myths of the Goddess (e.g., Mariyammaṉ) are found in the Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, and the Telugu areas in south India. Much has been, is being and will be written about the so-called Mother Goddess and her many forms and names. How are the Sanskritic goddesses and the village ones related or contrasted?

A favourite way of integrating the village goddesses into a Hindu system has been to see them as *avatāras* of Kālī or relatives of Śiva, as the village folk themselves often do: many of the Māriyammaṉ-goddesses are given legends and names that connect them with Pārvatī and Śiva (e.g., Whitehead 1921, 122). There are also studies that demonstrate a continuity between the Sanskritic elements and the village ones, and between the village sacrifices and the Vedic ones (Spratt 1966; Biardeau 1979). The buffalo-sacrifice is seen to have many of the elements of the Vedic sacrifice (buffalo = bull; buffalo-fat smeared on the buffalo's head = omentum smeared in the Vedic sacrifice; the lamp on the head of the buffalo = the sacrificial fire; the post representing Poturāju or Buffalo-king = the *yūpa* post of Vedic sacrifices made of *sami* wood). Also, the village goddess, or the Ammaṉ killing the buffalo is seen as no other than the Devī (in the *purāṇas*) killing the Mahiṣāsura, the Buffalo-demon, in cosmic battle.

Psychologically-minded analysts also bring the two kinds of goddesses together, and bring them close to home (*akam*). Themes of 'male lust and female wrath' (Brubaker 1978) are seen as uniting the variety of village Ammaṉ and Sanskritic Devī myths. In puranic mythology, the energy or *śakti* of every god is feminine, without which a Śiva is only a *Śava* (corpse). Psychoanalytically, this has meant the passive male's terror of the fierce castrating omnivorous female—the beheading of the buffalo or demon is seen as symbolic of castration; the ambivalence of the Goddess is seen as the ambivalence of mothers—they are both loving and terrible. Jung was one of the first analysts to identify this split mother in the figure of Kālī (Jung 1938). The consort goddesses are the benevolent Breast Mothers; Kālī and her various allomorphs are the Tooth Mothers. If we add the notion of the *vagina dentata* (Elwin 1942–43) in folklore, the picture of the castrating female becomes clearer. Though they are called 'mothers', neither kind of goddess fits a Madonna-with-a-Child archetype very well. Yet, mothers or not, they seem to represent two aspects of the feminine. A Kannada proverb clearly says *nāri munidare māri*: 'Woman, when furious, is a Goddess [*māri*].' Elmore, to the dismay of Whitehead (1921, 15), comes out with it quite bluntly, without any analytic frills: '. . . the Dravidian deities are female because the Dravidian women were specially quarrelsome, vindictive and jealous, and . . . their tempers and curses made people feel that it was wise to propitiate female spirits.'

Before we go on, I should like to make two points which have been clear for some time:

1. The Goddess, whether Devī or Māriyammaṉ in her many forms, is not a mother. She has no children, in most of the myths. *Ammaṉ* or *Amma*, as she is called in Tamil and Kannada, could mean either 'mother' or 'lady'. Her affliction, smallpox, is called *ammai* (Tamil), *amma* (Kannada) in a propitiatory euphemism.

2. She stands clearly contrasted with consort goddesses like Lakṣmī or Pārvatī, who are married, auspicious; their shrines are a part of the larger temples devoted to their husbands. Even the consort goddesses, it must be noted, are not true mothers; Lakṣmī has no children in Sanskritic mythology, and Pārvatī's are extrauterine miracles.

Although the contrasts, however we name them, between the Breast Mothers (Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, etc.) and the Tooth Mothers (Māriyamman̲, etc.) are by now well known in the literature, it would be useful to present a brief summary of them, as in Table 1.[12]

Table 1

Two Types of Indian Goddesses

Breast Mothers (Consort Goddesses)	Tooth Mothers (Virgin Goddesses, Amman̲)
Married; subordinate to the male consort.	Basically independent; if married, in-subordinate or fatal to consort; male could be consort, brother, servant or guardian.
Related to auspicious, life-cycle rituals; weddings, good fortune.	Crisis-deities, invoked when life-cycles are disrupted; seen as inflicting as well as removing epidemics, famine, etc.; leaving one alone is part of their grace.
Household deities; temples within village.	Temples often outside village boundaries; goddess brought into village only on special occasions.
Well-sculpted faces and images.	Rough-hewn, often faceless images; often objects other than icons, like pots.
Not born of the earth; pure, chaste, with claims to universality.	Of the earth, earthy, often literally. Seen often as lustful, angry, coquettish. Associated, most often, only with a village after which she is named.
Benevolent, unless offended. Lakṣmī intercedes for mortals with the great god in Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*; Pārvatī, in folktales.	Ambivalent; dread an intimate part of the devotion. Possession a part of the ritual.
Vegetarian.	Blood sacrifices (or substitutes) demanded, offered.
Brahman or brahmanised priests.	Mostly non-brahman, often untouchable officiants.

There are minor exceptions to these contrasts, and in particular cults some features may cross over from one side to another, in myth, name, degree of benevolence or ambivalence. While these crossings have been

studied for the Amman̲-figure who becomes a consort goddess, we know little about the few cases (seen in folktales) where Lakṣmī, usually a benevolent Breast Mother, acts like a Tooth Mother as an offended deity—even then, she afflicts a person or a household, never a whole village, as does the Amman̲. (There are also male folk-gods like Śani who behave like Amman̲.) We see in these contrasts that the consorts are divine and public in the myths but may become, in ritual and worship, patron-deities of household events like birth and marriage. They may move from *puṟam* to *akam*.

To explicate the contrast between the great Sanskritic consort goddesses and the village Amman̲ goddesses, I should like to look closely at one Kannada folk-myth, which also motivates a sacrificial ritual of buffaloes to the village goddess. I shall present the entire myth so that the reader may experience the aesthetic impact of the sequence of events.[13]

A long time ago, elders arranged marriages for girls before they came of age. That was the custom. If a girl menstruated before she was married, they would blindfold the girl and leave her in a forest. This practice was chiefly among brahmans. Once, a brahman girl did get her period before she could get married. Her father blindfolded her and left her in a jungle. A Liṅgāyat man watched him abandon his daughter in the jungle, and felt compassion. He said, '*Ayyō pāpa*, poor thing!' and rescued the girl; he untied the cloth round her eyes, brought her home, and treated her as his own daughter.

A *mādiga* [untouchable] saw her one day, and fell in love with her. He vowed to himself, 'I must marry this girl, I must.' He told his mother, '*Avva*, you'd better learn to dress like a brahman woman. Help me get this girl for your daughter-in-law.' He persuaded her against her will, dressed himself in brahman-style clothes, went to the Liṅgāyat's house, and asked for his foster-daughter's hand; the Liṅgāyat agreed, because he too wanted to get this brahman girl married to a brahman. He arranged the marriage, and sent the girl to her mother-in-law's place. There she did all the housework and cooked for her husband and mother-in-law. The mother-in-law liked the young woman's brahman cuisine, but would grumble now and then, 'What good is this tasteless stuff? Is this food? How nice it would be to have a leg of mutton!' The brahman daughter-in-law overheard this a few times and was puzzled by it. But she was afraid to tell her husband about it. Some years passed, and she bore two sons. The children—after all, they were boys—were curious to find out what their father did all day. 'What does Appa do, why does he go to the foot of the hills?' they wondered. One day, they followed him without his knowledge. They observed him as he sat at the foot of the hill, as he measured people's feet, and sewed sandals for them. They came home and gathered broad banyan leaves and leaves of the milk-hedge. And they placed their own feet on the leaves, took measurements, and cut outlines along the curves of their feet. Their mother saw what they were doing; she was disgusted.

She scolded them: 'Don't do such things, children!' But can boys keep quiet? They said proudly, 'We are doing exactly what Daddy does. He does just this all day under that hill.'

She knew now what her husband was up to. She realised what 'caste' of man she had gone and married. She also understood in a flash why her mother-in-law grumbled, and craved for sheep's flesh every day.

As she thought of it, anger rose in her. It rose and rose in her body, and became a terrible rage that was all over her. She grew bigger and bigger, standing tall, joining earth and heaven in one body, and became a Māri [terrifying goddess]. She put out her tongue and went in search of her husband. He saw her, and knew he had to flee. As he fled, she said, 'I'll first finish off these children who were born to that man. Then I'll get him.' The children were terrified by the Māri, their mother, and hid themselves in a couple of goats that were around. The Māri broke off the goats's heads, drank her children's blood, and went again in search of her husband. The Mādiga man saw that the Māri was coming after him. So he entered a he-buffalo that was grazing in the field nearby. Māri saw him hide himself in the animal, and moved toward him, making angry noises, taking dancing steps. And she slit open the he-buffalo, drank her husband's blood, and took a vow standing right there. 'I'll cut you down every year, and get lamps lit from the fat of your body.' Saying that, she came leaping forward saying, 'I've taken my husband as my *ahuti* [sacrifice], taken my children as *ahuti*. Where shall I settle down?' she moved forward. As she came, midway she met a Dāsayya (a religious mendicant).

This Dāsayya was from Alsandi. He would roam the town all day and sleep in the village chieftain's [*gauḍa*'s] cattle-shed. He had a piece of coconut frond with him. The village chieftain's daughter-in-law would watch over it in his absence. But one day, when he was asleep, she moved it somewhere. The Dāsayya woke up next morning, looked for his coconut frond all over and couldn't find it anywhere. 'Whoever has taken it, they'd better return it,' he screamed. 'Please,' he begged. But nobody came forward to return it to him. He got exasperated, and shouted, 'I'll go get Māri. She'll get it back for me.' And he went in search of her.

On the way, he saw an old, old woman picking dry cow-dung patties and putting them in her basket. She was looking for someone to lift the basket to her head. When she saw the Dāsayya walking that way in a hurry, she called him and asked him, 'Come here, my man. Please help me get this basket on my head.' 'I've no time to help you with your baskets and things. I'm looking urgently for Māri. I've got to get to her soon. Don't interrupt me.' The old woman replied, 'I'm the village Māri. Come here.' The Dāsayya didn't believe her. He scolded her: 'Hey, old woman! Don't tell lies. I'll let it pass, and help you this time with your basket. Then I'll go my way.' But when he went near her and tried to place the basket on her head, he shuddered with fear—because she had a coiled seven-headed serpent on her head for her basket-rest [*simbi*]. He knew this was Māri, and stood there in terror, not knowing which direction he was facing. Then the Māri comforted him and told him: 'You walk in front of me. I'll walk behind you. You'll hear the jingle of my anklets. You must never turn around and look at me. If you do, you'll be my third *ahuti*.'

The Dāsayya agreed to do as he was told, and walked ahead. Behind him, the old woman changed into Māri, stood tall, joining earth and sky, put out her lolling tongue and started walking. When they came near Alsandi, the Dāsayya felt he couldn't hear the anklet sounds any more. So he turned around and looked. He saw the incarnation of Māri, was dumb struck, stood there shivering. Māri was furious. She lashed out with her tongue at him, slapped him to the ground, killed him, drank his blood, and came to Alsandi. There she wasted [*nāśa māḍu*] the village chieftain, all the people of the village, destroyed the whole place, and she left untouched only the lane where calves are tethered. Then she came to Beguru, drank the blood of the people there, and finished all the fodder and water the Beguru chieftain had stored for thousands of cows. Her thirst was still not quenched. At the boulder [*Nerigekallu*], she shook the borders [*nerige*] of her sari, took it off and threw it at Mailigehalli ['the village of dirty clothes']. She struck the rock with her fist. As Māri's hand struck the stone, water sprang from it—the Earth Goddess below made it spring from rock. Māri drank from the spring, she went to Antaragaṭṭe ['A bund with intervals'] and stayed there, showing her long lolling tongue. This Māri hopped and hopped [*antarisi*] from place to place, and arrived at Antaragaṭṭe. That's why she is called Antaragaṭṭamma. This story also tells you why goats, sheep and a buffalo are sacrificed to her when she is angry.

Let us set this story against a *locus classicus* for the Devī myth, a passage from the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (summarised in Shulman 1980, 178–9):

> When Mahiṣa the buffalo-demon was lord of the demons and Indra lord of the gods, the gods were cast out from heaven by the demon host. From the energy (*śakti*) born from the anger of the gods, Devī became incarnate. The gods bestowed their divine weapons upon her and sent her to do battle with Mahiṣāsura. Riding on a lion, she fought with the demon and finally placed her foot upon his neck and pierced him with a spear; he half came forth from his own mouth, and the goddess cut off his head and killed him.

The contrasts between the village story and the Sanskrit *purāṇa* should be noted. The folk-myth is not a tale of war. The woman is an ordinary housewife who, in an excess of fury at deceit and defilement, grows in physical stature, and becomes a demonic goddess. Desecrated by her marriage to an untouchable, she can no longer be part of any household or community; so she destroys her house (sets fire to it in some versions), her children, husband and mother-in-law, and finally the village. Such

acts are against every code of the wifely role which she is now bursting through; violated, she violates in turn. And unlike Kālī, she actually has children here, and enacts *both* the loving and the terrible mother in two stages. Her acts give an actual village its name (*antara-gaṭṭe*: 'place of [the goddess's] leaps'), and in turn, she gets her name from it (Antaragaṭṭamma). As the name suggests, by the time we come to the end of the story, she *is* the goddess of the village. When an epidemic strikes, it is seen as her fury; but only she can protect her village from it; and as she is the village herself, she also suffers her own fury. Thus is she many-phased and multi-vocal. Clearly, there are homologies between buffalo, untouchable and the epidemic (that occasions the goddess-cult) as forces of intrusion and disorder, as there are homologies between the gardens that buffaloes ravage, the brahman woman and the village in the throes of an epidemic (Brubaker 1978, 345).

The village story begins in the *akam* mode as a folktale with no names of places or persons, with a household theme of marriage and family. It ends outdoors, as *puṟam*, with dire public consequences—as the goddess's action destroys villages, creates and gives names to new ones. Meanwhile, the protagonist herself gets a local habitation and a name. The end of the story is dense with names. We see a movement from a folktale to a myth in the course of the telling. We see a myth being created before our eyes, even as a goddess grows out of an ordinary mortal, made numinous by uncontrollable rage. Such a movement from a household to a public realm is characteristic also of many classical Tamil *puṟam* poems:

ELEGY ON A YOUNG WARRIOR

O heart sorrowing
for this lad
 once scared
of a stick
lifted in mock-anger
when he refused
a drink of milk,
 now
not content with killing
war-elephants
with spotted trunks,
 this son
of the strong man who fell yesterday
seems unaware of the arrow
in his wound,
his head of hair is plumed
like a horse's
 he's fallen
on his shield,
his beard still soft.

Poṉmutiyār, *Puṟanāṉūṟu* (Ramanujan 1985, 165)

The poem, like the folk myth above, opens with a homely childhood scene and goes swiftly to a battlefied, spanning a lifetime, moving *outward*. There are many other aspects of this folk myth that deserve comment, but I shall content myself with one—its relation to the classic Tamil epic.

The emphasis in the Antaragaṭṭamma story is on the *self-creation* of a goddess (unlike the Goddess created *by* the great gods in the passage from the classical myth given above), and on her containment by villagers who try both to pacify her and to keep her out by giving her a dwelling-place, a *nele*, outside the village, by giving her a specific name and a sacrifice (of her husband or buffalo-surrogate) she demanded. All this becomes possible and necessary because a woman is (*a*) desecrated and (*b*) by a marriage between brahman and untouchable, representing the two ends of the social and ritual hierarchy, both capable of special powers, one of brahmanical purity, the other of magical sorcery and dangerous pollution.[14] Such desecration, violence and miscegenation are conditions for the eruption of demonic divinity. There are many other folk-myths depicting these conditions: the birth-stories of Aiyaṉār; the Renuk-Ellamma myths with the transposed heads of brahman and untouchable; the *vil pāṭṭu* narrative of Muttuppaṭṭaṉ, the Tinnevelli culture-hero, a brahman who loves and marries outcaste cobbler women, becomes chieftain of a cobbler village, is killed by robbers in battle and becomes a god.[15]

There is no talk of chastity and its powers here, as there is in classical Tamil or Sanskrit epics—where chaste women (*pativratas*) are central figures (see Narayana Rao). Yet the story of Kaṇṇaki in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, and despite her becoming a goddess of chastity (*pattiṉi*), follows a pattern very similar to our folk-myth. She is a quiescent, even colourless wife-figure until she hears that her husband has been falsely accused and brutally executed, and she herself widowed. She then flies into a fury, flings her breast on the towers of Maturai and burns it down. She becomes a goddess, and people install her image and propitiate her. The story can be seen mainly as a story about the power of chastity, equated with *tapas*, 'burning', because both have pent-up fires of self-control

and a tendency to start conflagrations. But the excess of rage, the power of an ordinary woman to explode into a goddess when she is given a sufficient charge of anger, seems to me to be the underlying pattern. It is as much a theory of emotion as a theology; together they make a special recognisable genre, the folk-myth of the village goddess.

Now, what happens when classical myths are borrowed and retold by folk-performers? We do have, for instance, folk *Rāmāyaṇas* and *Mahābhāratas* (Rāgau and Basavayya 1973). For one thing, in Kannada they appear mostly in bits and pieces. I know of only one whole folk *Rāmāyaṇa* so far in Kannada. It is sung in its entirety by the Tambūri Dāsayyas, but even this is only three thousand lines long. Looking at them in the light of the Sanskritic epic (either in Sanskrit or in Kannada transpositions like the *Torave Rāmāyaṇa*), one can point to three kinds of striking changes in the folk-form. All three of them tip mythology, a public form, toward a more domestic genre.

First of all, the gods and heroes are domesticated. Here is an example. When Rāma banishes the pregnant Sītā to the forest, she weeps and wishes for death. Birds and bears and lions feel her misery. Unable to bear it any longer, she decides to drown herself in the Ganges. As she falls into the water, two fish rescue her, hold her by the hand, and bring her back to dry land. We learn that the two fish were really born when Rāma in his faraway capital wept over the terrible thing he had done to Sītā, and shed tears, and cleared his nose into the Ganges water; his gobs of snot had been transformed into the two fishes. They were his body's unwitting offspring.

Sītā, though distraught, finally responds to the affection and concern of these fish, and asks them their names. They say, 'Kuścala' and 'Avulu' (nonsense words). She offers to reward them with her necklace, which they refuse. So she decides to name the twins in her womb after them. Hence their names, Kuśca and Lava, which are slightly garbled versions of Kuśa and Lava, the names of the twins in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Such folk-etymologies are common in these renderings (and not unusual in the Sanskritic epics either).

Not only has the folk version added an episode, and connected Rāma's grief with Sītā's rescue, it gives Rāma a human nose and gobs of snot (*goṇṇe*). In the Sanskritic *Rāmāyaṇas*, Rāma swoons but never blows his nose. On the other hand, the folk conceptions are of a piece with the classical ones in that no body fluid is ever wasted: blood, sweat, and tears—and snot—are all sexual and procreative.

In another, earlier episode, Rāvaṇa (here called Rāvula) is seen as the real father of Sītā. Rāvaṇa and his queen Mandodari have no children. So he does fierce penance to Śiva who, after testing him, gives him a mango and asks him to share it with his queen. But he eats the flesh himself and gives her only the seed. So he gets pregnant. At the end of nine months, he sneezes, and gives birth to Sītā through his nose. (Sītā, in Kannada, could mean both 'the heroine Sītā' and 'he sneezed' or 'a cold'.) One also suspects here the presence of traditions other than the one represented by the well-known Vālmikī. In these less-known *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions (e.g., Sarma 1973; Shulman), Rāvaṇa is the father of Sītā. When he hears the prophecy that she will cause his death, he throws her in the river (a female Oedipus), as he does here. She later marries Rāma and Rāvaṇa abducts her, which leads to Rāma's killing him.

In such an episode, apart from the grotesquerie, certain elements absent or unclear in the Sanskritic texts are explicitly present: a sense of fate dogging Rāvaṇa; an explanation of why Sītā was found by Janaka (in the furrow, hence her name Sītā, 'furrow' in Sanskrit). Rāvaṇa's passion for Sītā becomes an example of the father's incestuous love for his daughter. Psychoanalytically speaking, his pregnancy would express a male's envy of the womb. Thus, the folk versions add new facets of interpretation and relationship to the story.

Here are two other examples of the domestication of classical characters. In Kannada village mythology, the Sun (Sūrya) and the Moon (Candra) are children of the Sky-Mother.

Sky and Earth are sisters. Sky sends her sons, Sun and Moon, to Earth for a feast. Sun is a glutton and full of haste. He eats all he can at the feast and doesn't remember his poor mother, Sky. But the younger Moon remembers his starving mother when he sits down to eat and cannot bring himself to enjoy the goodies. So he secretly saves a piece of each of the good dishes and brings them home. Sky is waiting for her sons' return and asks, 'What did you bring for me?' Sun is short-tempered and snaps at her, 'What are you saying, Mother? Won't they say, "Those boys not only ate, they also looted the kitchen"? Don't be greedy.' But Moon cannot stand his mother's being rebuked. He stops his brother short and says, 'Stop it. I've brought her some things.' Sky beams with happiness. She curses Sun: 'You are always angry. May you burn always. When you get too hot, may the world curse you. When you wake up, may the world's people show you their buttocks!'[16] Then she blesses Moon: 'You're my good son. May you always be soft and bring solace. May the world sing about you and praise you.'

Sun was angry that he was cursed and that Moon was blessed. He rushed toward his mother and scattered the grains of rice in her hand all over. They are the stars.[17]

One widely told folk-myth is The Quarrel of Gaṅgā and Gaurī (another name for Pārvatī), the two wives of Śiva. They are as jealous and catty as any pair of co-wives. They even fight hand to hand, tear each other's hair and roll on the ground. Then Gaurī menstruates, and Gaṅgā (Ganges, goddess of rivers and water) seizes the chance to humble her. She withdraws all the water of the world and takes herself to the white mountain where she came from. Gaurī has no water to wash or bathe anywhere in the world. Until she has a ritual bath, the pollution of her period is not washed away. So she has to go and beg Gaṅgā for water, and promises to share her husband, Śiva. Then Gaṅgā relents and lets the waters flow.

Their saucy colloquial dialogue and jealous exchanges, no less than the indignity of the menstruating Gaurī left without bath-water, truly 'domesticate' the great goddesses. In Sanskritic mythology, gods and goddesses do not even blink or sweat (with one exception, Pārvatī), let alone weep tears, sneeze or menstruate. Their feet do not touch the earth.

Second, the folk renditions *localise* the pan-Indian epics and myths, often with the help of local names, places, motifs and folk-etymology. Various local places, hills, rivers, trees, and birds are given names that connect them with the great gods: the river Netravati (Sanskrit *netra*, 'eye') is the tear of Viṣṇu as the Boar. When Paraśurāma killed his own mother, a whole river was red with blood; a woman cried, '*Ayyō hoḷe!*' ('Alas, the river'), from which the name of an actual river, the Aihoḷe, is derived in the place-legend, and so on.[18] Place-legends tell us that Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā passed through many of the places now named after them. One such place is Rāmanāthapura in Hassan district, where the Kāveri waters are credited with healing powers, especially for skin diseases. The local folk tell the following story. When the two heroes and Sītā wandered in the south during their exile, they found no water for days; they could not bathe nor could they eat proper food. So Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were covered with weeping sores. The villagers used to say, 'One can't stand anywhere near Rāma, he smells so. Such a stench!' When Rāma came upon the Kāveri River, he happily bathed in it for many days, and his body became clean and whole and fragrant again. So the place (*pura*) was called 'Rāmanāthapura'.[19] The word *nātha* in Kannada means 'smell, stench'. In Sanskrit, it means 'lord'.

Third, folk renditions tend to *contemporise* the action at various points—sometimes with satiric effects. I shall give here only one example, again from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in a northern Karnataka folk-play.

> When Rāma was exiled, all the people of Ayodhyā, who loved him dearly, followed him, crying their eyes out, to the river where he entered his ferry. From the ferry, he bade them goodbye and with much concern said, 'Brothers and Sisters, please go home now. I'll be back in fourteen years.' He went then on his perilous journey to the south, lost and retrieved Sītā, fought and killed Rāvaṇa, and returned after fourteen years of exile to the same spot. He found a small group of people standing there, their hair and beards grown long and gray, their nails black and uncut, their clothes tattered. When he saw them, he knew they had stood there rooted all these years. He asked them why they stood the way they did. They said, 'O Rāma, we are the eunuchs of Ayodhyā. You bade goodbye only to the men and women, calling them brothers and sisters. You didn't bid us goodbye. So we stand here waiting for you.' Rāma was deeply touched by their devotion and felt ashamed of his own oversight. So he blessed them and gave them a boon: 'O eunuchs of Ayodhyā, I'm greatly touched by your devotion. May you be reborn as the next Congress Party of India and rule the country!'

RITUAL AND THEATRE

Not only are sacred narratives embedded in ritual (and vice versa) as in *vrata kathā*, folk-theatre also has a deep-seated pattern close to ritual. Ritual and theatre, as public genres of cultural performance, the former religious and the latter aesthetic in intent, overlap in many ways. Ritual is drama in northern Karnataka villages, and ritual models are clearly in evidence in theatrical performance. They also include the audience in various 'indexical' ways, which is the focus of this section.

C. Kambar (1972), in a richly detailed paper, has pointed to the similarities between ritual and dramatic performances, and the way ritual is like theatre in northern Karnataka villages. During a *jātra* festival, devoted to village deities like the Seven Sisters, an *āsādi* (low-caste) storyteller tells the story of the deities, describes their powers and the penalties for neglecting them. Such storytelling is a kind of announcement. For the next few days (three to seven), the *āsādi* summons the elders, leads the procession and collects food from the villagers. He wears a sari, and mounts the temple-cart with the goddess. After a procession, a buffalo is (or used to be) sacrificed. The *āsādi* drinks the buffalo's blood and holds a snake-headed sceptre. Soon he begins to tremble and shake. He is accompanied by two more *āsādis* with drums and cymbals. They sing the glory of the goddess. The possessed *āsādi*-priest sings the first word of each line of a song, the other two complete it. They sing, and he dances round the deity. At the end, according to custom, they revile the high castes, especially brahmans, who not only accept but demand that they be reviled (often with ropes and whips). The *āsādi* then foretells the future, promises to keep epidemics in check and to safeguard children and crops. At the end of the possession-ritual, he lays down his staff and becomes dis-possessed.

The sequence parallels, according to Kambar, six elements of Kannada folk drama, and I quote:

1. Prelude: the ritual involving the deity;
2. Make-up: the priest disguising himself as the deity;
3. Chorus and music: two singers with drum and cymbals accompanying the priest-actor's dance;
4. Dance: the spiritual and physical re-enactment of what they sing;
5. Theme: the story of the deity sung by priest and chorus;
6. *Maṅgaḷā*: the release of the possessing deity and the close of the 'play'.

> By their choral singing, the beat of the drum, and the impersonator's dance, the 'actors' initiate their devotee-cum-spectators into an experience of *bhakti*, devotion, which is the basic function of [such] folk-theatre. (Kambar 1972, 7)

Professional castes like *dāsas* specialise in storytelling and ballad-singing. They are devotees of different gods (e.g., *dāsa* means 'servant' of a god); they sing, dance, narrate and impersonate. Even when their medium is not dance but the spoken word, and the story is not about a god, the basic structure of the storytelling is maintained: invocation, story, blessing the audience.

Thus, ritual is the proto-form of a theatrical performance. Even when the theme may not be religious. Certain assumptions and characteristics of ritual are also present in folk-theatre. For instance, notions of possession are never far from the audience's mind. I have seen, in plays about Narasiṃha, the man-lion incarnation of Viṣṇu who disembowels the demon enemy, the performance comes to a standstill when the Narasiṃha character appears on the stage. He is worshipped with flowers, coconut and so forth, so that he may not, in his dramatic rage, actually disembowel the person playing the demon. Villagers tell stories of how previous Narasiṃhas forgot they were playing a role, were possessed by the god, and actually mauled or killed their opposite numbers. Such precautions are taken also with the demons themselves (like Rāvaṇa), and with murder stories (like *Saṅgyā Bāḷyā*, based on a notorious village murder). Such mergers of actor and character have implications for poetics.

Folk-poetics (especially in bardic recital, ritual and theatre) differ from classical *rasa*-poetics in important ways. *Rasa*-poetics governs Sanskritic poetry and theatre. *Rasa*-poeticians take great care to insist that poet and character are distinct; the poet's feelings (*bhāva*) are not the created character's. Nor are the character and the actor who plays him to be merged with each other, and neither should the feelings (*bhāva*) of the

audience and those of the poet.[20] Thus, the poet/audience, character/actor, poet/character dichotomies are the bases of *rasa*-poetics and its theory of emotions. Personal feelings, *bhāvas*, are private, transient, inchoate; aesthetic emotions, *rasas*, are generalised (*sādhāranikṛta*), composed, structured. We go to the theatre to compose our *bhāvas* into *rasas*.

Folk-poetics, from all that we have said above, works on a different view of emotion: bard and character, bard and audience, bard and actor, actor and character are merged at crucial moments and separated at ordinary times. One goes to the theatre/ritual to experience such mergers in different degrees.

We can see how *bhakti* poetry and performances share such a view of poetry and emotion:

Poets,
    beware, your life is in danger:
the lord of gardens is a thief,
        a cheat,
master of illusions;

he came to me
    a wizard with words,
    sneaked into my body,
        my breath,

with bystanders looking on,
        seeing nothing,

he consumed me
        life and limb

and filled me
        making me over
    into himself.

Nammāḻvār (Ramanujan 1981, 76)

One should not assume that 'possession' is the monopoly of the folk genres; the Vedas had their *vipras*, 'the quivering ones'. The study of folk-theatre has much to tells us, both by contrast and convergence, about Vedic and classical ritual and aesthetics.

The question of 'tragedy' is related to folk-poetics. It is often said that Indian literature has no 'tragedy' as a genre. This would certainly be true of Sanskrit drama and *kāvya* narratives, but untrue of Indian folk literature and of epic texts like the *Mahābhārata*. Modern Indian critics have seen 'tragedy' in various stories of the *Mahābhārata*, especially those of

Karṇa and Aśvatthāman. For instance, in Kannada, B. M. Srikanthayya adapted Sophocles' *Ajax* as *Aśvatthāman* in the 1930s for the Kannada stage. One may consider the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* as a 'tragedy', ending in the death of the hero and heroine as well as their antagonists. It has a three-part structure: Passion, Purgation, Apotheosis (to adapt Kenneth Burke's terms). There are many 'tragic' (not simply in the sense of 'sad, unfortunate') folk-narratives and folk-plays—for example, the *villuppāṭṭus* or bow songs of Tamil, and the *pāḍdana* of Tulu.[21] One should particularly attend to the ones that deal with the emergence of a local god out of a culture-hero (like Muttuppaṭṭaṉ in Tamil, Kōṭi-Cennaya in Tulu), or of a powerful local goddess emerging out of a betrayed or victimised female, as Kaṇṇaki or Antaragaṭṭamma.

A dark desecration in the family, most often having to do with irreversible caste-pollution of a sexual kind, a growing recognition of it, the consequent rage, the violent bursting-through of ordinary bonds of role and domestic culture, the expansion of a household affair into a communal conflagration involving the whole village irrespective of caste or class, the rise of a goddess of terrifying power crying for vengeance and pacified by a ritual—such a pattern could be identified as a kind of indigenous Indian 'tragedy', certainly as indigenous to south Indian villages as Greek tragedy was to ancient Greece. Such a genre of narratives and plays, as among the ancient Greeks, is intimately related to a solemn, gory, and cleansing ritual for an entire community, which feels the purgation, the terror of the victim, the raging power of the numinous goddess, a healing peace and joy (as is often recorded) after the partaking of the sacrifice.

Such a genre is not exactly Aristotelian, and we need new definitions that are neither Sanskritic nor Western. In classical Sanskrit terms, drama dealt chiefly with *vīra* ('heroic') and *sṛṇgāra* ('erotic') themes, sometimes with *karuṇa* ('pathos', 'compassion'). The other emotions like *raudra* ('rage') and *bhayānaka* ('terror'), without which there can be no tragedy, are minor in Sanskrit drama; death itself is only one of the thirty-three minor themes in Sanskrit poetics. These 'recessives' are 'dominant' in some of the battle-scenes of the *Mahābhārata*, the classical Tamil *puṟam* poems, the Narasiṃha, or man-lion, story of Viṣṇu's incarnations—the last, a favourite of village plays. One also sees these *rasas* portrayed prominently in Kathakali performances in Kerala, as in the unforgettable scenes of the vengeful killing of Kīcaka, and of Draupadi at the end of the war smearing her hair with the blood of her disembowelled molester, Duhśāsana. Bhāsa, alone and a maverick among Sanskrit playwrights, deals directly in violent episodes like the above. And his connections with Kerala and the kinds of materials mentioned here are yet to be investigated.

Thus, genres also specialise in certain aesthetic effects, take part in a cultural division of labour. *Akam* genres (whether sacred or secular, domestic tale or ritual tale), while they detail adventure, often hardship and cruelty, do not end in death. The few tales I know that end in death, like the Indian Oedipus tales (Ramanujan 1983), either have ritual and public counterparts or domestic variants which give them a clear happy ending. Not so the *puṟam* bardic stories that are connected with ritual, especially possession, like the goddess-myths discussed both above and here.

Furthermore, even well-known domestic tales (like type 707, discussed in an earlier section) can also have public versions that include, induce possession. In such cases, possession occurs in the middle of a tale. The story of the Three Golden Sons is the focus of a central Himalayan myth.[22] In this region, there are two kinds of stories told, edifying stories (called *bhārat*, chiefly classical epics and legends of the nine Nāths) and trance-inducing stories (called *jāgar*). Trance-inducing stories have three formal characteristics that distinguish them from other kinds of stories: 'They are told in the second person, the bard addressing them directly to the god whose story he is recounting; they are accompanied by the brass plate as well as the drum; and they are illustrated by the dance of a possessed medium, who goes into trance at the beginning of each story and mimes its actions. *Jāgar* culminate in a consultation of the god and his dismissal.'[23]

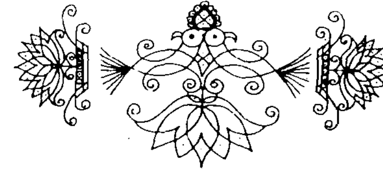
There is a Telugu story about such stories, a meta-tale par excellence. It fuses character, storyteller, and the buffalo in the sacrifice about which the story is told. Elmore (1915, 119–20) summarizes it thus:

In the village of Oragallu a brahman refused to worship Matangi. All kinds of evils came upon his household. When he enquired the reason he was informed that it was because of his refusal to worship Matangi. He was ordered to arrange for a nine days' festival for her. He himself must be the *bainedu*, story-teller. His son must guard the light on the head of the buffalo, and his wife must take the place of the Matangi. All of these offices are performed by Mādigas (untouchables). The brahman was further informed that later in the ceremony he must be killed, his membranes made into drums, his arms cut off and placed in his mouth, his fat spread over his eyes, and the usual features of the buffalo sacrifice

performed. All castes were then to worship Mathamma in her Matangi form. This was all done, and afterwards the brahman was brought to life, and these various things were done to a buffalo. According to this story the buffalo sacrifice thus originated.

This folk-myth is about myth itself, of how myth generates ritual; how men re-enact myth in ritual, and how 'art imitates life, and life imitates art', as Wilde would say. In this story, the storyteller's life enacts and becomes the story. And the story enters the life of the listeners. Stories are scenarios.

On Folk Mythologies and Folk Purāṇas



Among the narrative genres of oral folk traditions, I'd like to include one that may be called 'folk-mythologies', to be distinguished from folk-epics, ballads, the various types of folktales, and so forth. When these folk-mythologies are related to a local cult, caste, with its own origin myths, sacred calendar and sacred geography, they tend to crystallise around a good-figure into long narratives that may be called 'folk Purāṇas.' The best known of these are *sthalapurāṇas* of the kind that David Shulman has studied for Tamil Nadu.[1] Whatever their oral sources, they tend to get written and elaborated by named poets. U. Ve. Cāminātiar, in his autobiography speaks of his *guru* in the nineteenth century being commissioned to write these 'temple myths'.[2]

Folk-mythologies of the kind I'm talking about haven't been written or written down except by folklorists in the last few decades—here I confine myself to the Kannada region where I've done my field studies. About five of them are well known in different districts of that area. In the latter part of this paper, I shall speak in detail of only one and present a section of it—the *Maleya Mādeśvara* narrative of about twenty-five thousand lines, some fifteen hundred pages in print, collated (and unfortunately conflated) by P.K. Rajasekhara in 1973.[3] It tells the story of Mādappa, a god/hero/saint of the southern Mysore hills, his arrival from the north, travelling from place to place in search of parents (as a form of Śiva, he has none and has to acquire suitable ones), then in pursuit of an evil Bali-like demon king (who has imprisoned all the celestials and set even Pārvatī to menial tasks), and then in search of devotees. In these searches, he ruthlessly tricks and destroys wicked men and women who refuse him oil for his bath or food for his begging bowl; and he brings his devotees wealth, children, and power. Each of these episodes is set in a

Mysore location that acquires a name from the incident described. His trail and his enemies and supporters make the geography sacred and mythic. Rivers, valleys, stones, hills, and plants are revalorised in this process. For instance, villagers show visitors a protrusion in a rock that commemorates the demon trying to embrace Pārvatī: she disappears and leaves a rock in his arms. But his phallus penetrates and goes through the rock—leaving to this day a visible protrusion.

In the interests of placing folk Purāṇas in perspective, I shall digress a little and talk about the ambience of these mostly uncollected but pervasive folk mythologies out of which the Purāṇas are made. One could speak of several kinds of relations between the Sanskritic (which for me include works in Sanskrit as well as in the standard, literary, especially poetic, dialects of our mother-tongues) and the folk-mythologies that exist in the sub-standard, not necessarily rural, non-literate dialects, those motherliest of mother-tongue dialects. If we may call the motifs, characters like Rāma or Sūrya, and episodes like those between Śiva and Parvatī or between Pārvatī and the demon, *signifiers* and call the meanings they carry for the natives their *signified*, I'd like to propose at least four different, rather obvious, relations between the Sanskritic and the folk-mythologies. Epics and Purāṇas are not distinguished here.

Examples for 1 in Table 1 are the major *avatārs* that both the Sanskritic texts and the folk texts share; for 2, figures of Śiva and Pārvatī who appear in both texts, but with different functions, episodes and so forth, or in new *avatārs* not found in the Sanskritic texts; for 3, Mādappa's journey as narrated above, which shares neither signifier nor signified (though abstracted patterns may be similar); for 4, Mādappa's killing the demon king, where the signifier is new but the signified is shared with many of the myths of Śiva and Viṣṇu.

Table 1
Relations between Sanskritic and
Folk Elements

Signifiers	Signified
1 same	same
2 same	different
3 different	different
4 different	same

Folk mythologies relate to Sanskritic ones in all four ways. They also relate in a fifth way, that is, they garble what they retell, a process that

goes both ways, in both kinds of texts, to delight and frustrate scholars, giving rise both to new myths and to new scholarly papers.

In taking the same gods and heroes as in the Sanskritic Epics and Purāṇas and making them do, say, and mean different things in a local milieu, the folk myths *domesticate* them, *incorporate* them in bodies that sweat, stink, defecate, and menstruate (which their Purāṇic counterparts usually don't, with a few notable exceptions, like Pārvatī making Gaṇeśa out of her body dirt), *localise* them, and often *contemporise* them. As I've written of these processes elsewhere, I shall cite just one example.[4]

Rāmanāthapura is a place in Hassan district, Karnataka. People tell the following story about it. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa wandered in the southern forests in the hot season, they couldn't find any water to bathe in. They were covered with dirt and Rāma positively stank to high heaven. When they came near this place, the villagers said, 'O, that Rāma, he really stinks!' But they also showed him their little stream, in which Rāma bathed and came out clean, even fragrant. He left all his stench in the stream. So that place was called 'Śrīrāmanāthapura'. In Sanskrit, it means, 'the town of Rāma's lord', but in Kannada it means, 'the town of Rāma's stink'. In Kannada, *nātha* means 'stink (bad) smell.' In this bilingual pun, we see the way the Rāma story is localised, de-Sanskritised, made earthy and corporeal.

Folk-myths also extend the common stock of well-known Purāṇic incidents in hundreds of ways. To give just one example: after the Churning of the Ocean, the sweat and dirt of the labouring gods and anti-gods muddied the waters and made it dark and salty. The dismayed Lord of Oceans came to Viṣṇu with a complaint. Viṣṇu gave him a boon—that sea water would look dark only at a distance and would be crystal clear in the hand. Such a story connects a daily perception with a mythic incident—as the Sanskritic Purāṇas themselves do very often. Such etiological myths that explain why something is what it is—why dogs copulate in public and get teased for it, why cats hide their faeces, why the chipmunk has three stripes, why the sky is so high (all because of mythic events)—give us a pervasive mythology of ordinary life. This process is the obverse of domesticating the Purāṇic myths, but the result is the same—connecting a myth set in the past with a mundane event in the present. Such connections are made in all three semiotic modes, the symbolic, the iconic, and the indexical, in Charles Peirce's terms. Localisations as in the Rāmanāthapura story make an *indexical* connection, for the place is the context for the incident. An example of the *iconic* would be why the onion is taboo for Vaiṣṇavas: because one cross-section of an onion is like the conch of

Viṣṇu and another cross section is like his discus. Another charming story illustrates the *symbolic*: Draupadi didn't want her husband Bhima ever to forget her sorrow when they lived incognito in Virāṭa's court. So she prayed to Kṛṣṇa, who created onions and threw them into Bhima's kitchen. Every time he peeled an onion, he would remember Draupadi; his eyes would burn and keep his revenge alive. Folk or false etymologies (false from the point of linguistic inquiry), again a favourite feature of Sanskritic myths, connect a language item or a place name to a mythic event, for example, the etymology for Rāmanāthapura.

In many of the features, the folk-myths are similar to the Sanskritic or 'classical' Purāṇic myths—except that we see them not in texts but in everyday speech, in a collective yet diachronic process, the stories being varied, reworked, etymologised, informed, or garbled by successive tellers—not really different, indeed, from the variant Purāṇic texts themselves, except that in the latter the variation is not as variable and the process is arrested by the fixation of texts.

Out of such shifting materials, such *sañcāri* (changing) motifs, a *sthāyi* (relatively stable) folk Purāṇa crystallises around a charismatic figure, a combination of hero, saint, and god, who claims miracles, collects devotees, asserts power over evil, becomes the center of a cult in a locale. Purāṇas, whether Sanskritic or folk, differ from other texts. They've been called 'mosaics' (Bonazzoli). To know a work of Kālidāsa is to know his exact words. But few Hindus, if any, know a Purāṇa as a whole text; they just know the stories. They fit Lévi-Strauss's description of myths as stories that survive translation (unlike poetry which, according to Frost, is what gets lost). Like most Hindus, for instance, I know the details of the *avatārs* of Viṣṇu, but I do not know the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. (I've argued elsewhere that the Epics are similarly held in Hindu memories, though parts of mother-tongue texts tend to be remembered verbatim, especially if they are considered sacred, like Tulsi's *Rāmcaritmānas*.[5] Among the Purāṇas, the *Bhāgavata* may be among the exceptions.) In spite of repeated efforts to impose schemes and canons on them from time to time, Purāṇas are open systems. In Tamil, the *Kanta Purāṇam* is called *kantal purāṇam*, meaning a Purāṇa of *kante* or *kantal*, of rags, of 'shreds and patches'. I recently found references to Christ, Moses, the Messiah, Noah and Queen Victoria in the appropriately up-to-date *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*. *Purāṇavam bhavati*, says an old *Nirukta* commentary—the old becomes new, exactly like any folk-text. One may go further and say that in such texts as the Purāṇas (as suggested above, the difference in range of variation between Sanskritic written ones and the oral folk Purāṇas is only a matter of degree) we see clearly and in extreme forms the nature of all texts, particularly Indian texts. We have been reminded in the last few years by text-theory that

> any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc., pass into the text and are redistributed within it, and there is always language before and around the text. Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot of course be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks.[6]

Folk-texts, especially, never let you forget the intertextual nature of *all* texts. It also helps to see the many narrative genres of a cultural unit (family, caste, village, and so forth) in relation to each other in a kind of ecological array of genres: folktales and folk-myths, texts in mother tongues and in Sanskrit (and other father-tongues), oral and written in their fixed and fluid forms (for both oral and written have both) and so on. Furthermore, motifs, structures, and whole narratives may move though different genres and acquire different properties and meanings according to the ambience of each genre. Contrary to one of the early principles of transformational grammar, we need to assert that meaning is *not* constant under transformations. Each text has to be read for itself and in context to get its meanings. Texts cannot predict contexts, structures cannot predict functions, nor motifs and types meanings. Archetypes are empty unless cultures, by which I mean sub-cultures, fill them. In the light of all these remarks, I'd like briefly to characterise folk-Purāṇas and present a section from *Maleya Mādeśvara*.

Folk Purāṇas in Kannada are distinguished from other folk-narratives by the following characteristics.

1. They are sung, maintained, and learnt according to certain ritual prescriptions by a group of specialists devoted to a specific god and initiated by, and raised to perform, special observances.
2. A musical instrument symbolic (or iconic or indexical) of the god is used in the singing/chanting/reciting of the Purāṇa, usually in a group with foreground (*mummēḷa*) and background (*himmēḷa*) performers. When not in use, these instruments are worshipped at the god's altar.
3. These Purāṇas are performed on special days (pilgrimages and occasions) and in places sacred to the god.
4. These narratives are long, several nights long. They contain chanted prose, verse, song, and refrains. They are segmented in *sālu* or line,

and *kava(ṭ)lu* or branch (section). *Sālu* represents a night's or two nights' worth of narrative; *kavalu* is a sub-story, a shorter narrative within the main one, not a unit of time. No single teller (to our knowledge) sings all of them, though he may know of them. Of the fourteen *sālus* of *Mādeśvara*, collected by P.K. Rājaśēkhara from nearly twenty singers in 1973, few singers knew more than a couple. In a sense the entire folk Purāṇa is known in detail only to a folklorist, who is a modern Vyāsa. Folklore in its natural state has Sūtas or reciters, but not Vyāsas or editors.

5. Like the Sanskritic Purāṇas, the story begins with a creation-myth (certainly the two major Kannada Purāṇas do)—though one can find them also without such creation-myths. They also contain a series of 'etiological' episodes that explain the names and epithets of the god/hero/saint (for he is all three), the holy places he visited, destroyed, blessed, or cursed. The criss-cross wanderings of the hero thus map his country, inscribing telltale traces of his miracles, wars, stratagems and so forth on places, many of them ending in the conversion of unwilling or arrogant people into devotees.[7]

6. One last point: in terms of Sanskritic Epics and Purāṇas, folklore in general, and folk Purāṇas in particular, present an alternative world; they are what we may call 'counter-texts' to their better-known 'classical' analogues. They may use (see earlier discussion of Table 1) many of the same characters, motifs, and so on (as Purāṇa experts will immediately recognise) but counter and invert them and give them new meanings. I shall present the opening creation-myth from *Mādeśvara*, to convey the style and tone of the Purāṇa. Then I shall suggest a few ways in which the folk Purāṇa uses and inverts classical motifs.

A CREATION-MYTH IN A FOLK PURĀṆA

Ādiśakti came into being
three days before earth, heaven,
and the netherworld
came into being,

three days before Brahmā, Viṣṇu,
and Śiva.

As time passed, she attained puberty.
She looked at the sky
and said, '*Ahha*, nothing in sight
to satisfy my passion,
to please my youth.
I've to (be)get one myself.'

and gave birth
to Brahmā.

When Brahmā was born,
four faces and eight hands,
she said to him: 'My boy, do you know
why I've brought you into the world?
I'm young and need a man
to satisfy me.
Look at me and be my husband.
I'll give you all my arts
and the world will be yours.'

Brahmā heard what his mother said
and let out four sighs.
'Mother, you bring me into the world
and ask me to be your
husband.
Would that be right? Your are my mother.'

'*Che*, idiot,' she said.
'Is it for this I got you?
Burn then
for your disobedience.'
So saying,
she placed her hand on his head.
Her hand had an eye of fire
and it burned him to ashes.

'I created this four-faced creature
to take care of my youth, but he wouldn't.
We'll have to get a new one,' said she,
and on the second day
she (be)got Ma'Isnu (Mahāviṣṇu).

He looked beautiful to her, even better
than the four-faced one.
Her youth overflowed and she giggled
and giggled with pleasure.

Ma'Isnu asked her,
'Mother, why do you laugh like that?'
She sat him next to her
and said lovingly, looking at his face:
'My man, do you know
why I've got you here?
I got one yesterday, but he wouldn't do

what I asked him to do.
I asked him to be my husband and satisfy me,
quench my youth's passion.
Let's live as if we are on the ocean
of milk, I said.
But he wouldn't look at me,
he talked back.
So I burned him to ashes.
I want you to look at me, be my husband
and quench my passion,' said the Great Mother.

The hair on Ma'Isnu's body stood on end.
'What kind of new talk
is this?' he said. 'Is this *dharma*?
You give birth to me and ask
me to look at you and be your husband.
In the world yet to come,
in that arrangement of things,
would the children born to the mother
go to the mother?'

The Great Mother said,
'Son, shouldn't a son go to the mother?'
Ma'Isnu knew all about this.
He said, 'Children go to the mother
to drink her milk, to give her happiness.
Would they satisfy the passion of the mother
who bore them? Why did you beget me?
I can't look at you,' he said.

She listened to Isnu.
Her youth makes her prance. Her eyes are full.
Her body is filling out like a bright yellow lemon.
She was now in a rage.
'Look, I got this fellow but he won't satisfy me.
Why should I let him live?
I'll burn him down
just like the other one,' she said
and turned him to ashes.
All she had to do was to place her hand
with its eye of fire on his head and he went up
in flames.

By the third day,
brimming with youth
she couldn't bear it any more.

She thought, 'Let's get a three-eyed one
for the third day.
What does it matter if he does not satisfy me?
Let's get a fellow
who will bring light to the world.'

Saying that, with her *māyā* [power of illusion]
she (be)got Śiva.

'My boy,' she said,
'I got you here to satisfy my youth,
to quench my passion.
I'll be yours, you be mine.
Be my husband
and give me pleasure.'

'Mother, you didn't wait long
to say such good words, did you?
Do sons and mothers ever get together like that?
That's not right.
If that's right, *dharma* will be in ruins,
karma will increase.
No, mother,
this won't do.
I won't raise my eyes and look at you,'
said Mādeśvara [Śiva].

Ādiśakti replied,
'If you and I don't live together
as husband and wife, the world will not sprout,
the dark that's around will not
clear up, and how will the world see light?
Where will children come
from and family life begin?
Don't talk like a coward now and ruin yourself.
Just listen to me and become my husband.'

'I can't. I can't be your husband, mother,
and I don't want you
to be my wife.
If we live as husband and wife,
the Wishing Cow will give no milk,
mother earth will be stunted,
clouds won't gather and pour down rain,
the fire goddess will turn away,
the Ganges will vanish.

In the Kali Age yet to come,
those who say Śiva will forget Śiva,
those who say Hara will not know Hara.
Liṅga-less heretics will rule the world,
darkness will shroud the world,
dharma will be in ruins, *karma* will swell. No, no,
I'll not look at you.'

'*Śābāśa*, my son. You are young,
but your talk is neat.
You are clever, smooth; your words have colour.
But don't you know I'm Ādiśakti?
All three gods are in my hands.
Fire, Ganges, gods, anti-gods,
the human race, are in these hands.
The world is entirely inside my heart.
Who's greater than me?
My hands have the power to create
worlds, and the power to burn them down.
Look at me,
and satisfy me, cover my youth.'

'Mother, are you the eldest, the greatest, in the world?'
'Yes, son, I'm Ādiśakti.'
'Mother, if I don't become your husband, what will you do to me?'
'I'll burn you down in a minute.'
'Really?'
'Really. I got two more like you before you.
They refused to satisfy me,
said like you
that they wouldn't do that to me, their mother.
So I thought,.Why should they grow up?
and I burned them to ashes.'
He listened carefully.
He was born with long matted hair;
it cascaded down his forehead.
He gathered it up and tied it over his head.
The Great Mother's youth brimmed over.
He asked, 'Mother, where are these fellows you burned down?'
'Not far from you. Turn around.'

Mādeva turned around and saw
two heaps of ash.
The hair on his body stood on end.
'She'll do the same to me,' he thought,
and became wary.

'Mother, you are the greatest.
You got me so that I could be your husband.
Right? Don't you want to see me grow up
and become bigger than you?
Don't you think
the husband should be stronger than the wife?'

She agreed, made a pavilion for him
to grow up in and saw him grow.
Then she said, 'My boy, I've helped you grow
from a little man to a big one.
You now look taller than me. Come now, satisfy me.'

'Wait, wait a little, mother.
You've waited this long,
can't you wait just a little bit more?'

She was happy.
She thought, '*Ahha*, he will satisfy me.'
She asked him, 'What else do you want?'
'Mother, if you want me to be your husband,
shouldn't I the husband be stronger than the wife?
Teach me all your arts,' said Mādeva.

'*Śabāśa*, my son. I'll teach you all my arts
and make you powerful.
What do you want?
I can give birth, burn, create things.'

'Mother, you give birth. You burn.
You make, you break.
If I have
to be your husband,
I must have at least a feather's worth more
than your powers.'

She was amazed at his words.
She looked at the sky and then she said,
'But why do you want these powers?'
'Mother, if you want me to be your husband,
you must fill me with your energy
and enterprise.
I must light up the world.
I must darken the lighted world.
I must give birth to celestials, rear humans,
create goddesses like Māri, Durgi, and Chaṇḍi,
three hundred million gods,
gandharvas, yakṣas, kinnaras, Kāli Mākālis,

create earth, heaven,
and the netherworlds,
ten directions all around, sun and moon,
Indra and Nārada, birds, demons, men,
and three crores of creatures—
teach me to do all that.'

'My boy, I've this ring on my hand.
All my power is in it.
If I take it off and lay it on the ground,
I'll not have the strength
to take a step.
And if I lose the eye of fire in my palm,
I'll have no life at all.
Let me keep my eye of fire.
Here, take my ring,
wear it, you'll see the universe
in this diamond,' said she,
full of love and infatuation.

Śiva learned all her arts from her,
Mādeśvara, lord with the eye
of fire.
He felt like laughing, but the mother didn't understand his tricks.

'What else do you want to learn?' she asked.

'*Ammā*, I'm expert in all the arts now.
I want to ask you something.
I have your *māyā*, your arts, your powers.
Now who's greater, you or me?'

'My child, what does it matter
how many arts you've learned?
I'm the one who brought you forth, am I not
the one who gave you all
your powers?'

As she said it, he laughed aloud.

'You haven't lost
your high and mighty ways, mother.
Am I not greater than you now?
All your powers are in my hands.'

'But my son, I am Ādiśakti, the source
of all those arts.

'Am I not then greater than you, my child?'

'Amma, then let's do something,' said Mādeva, our father.

'What's that?'

'Let's not argue. Let's see who is greater.
Let's dance,' said he.
'If you and I face each other and dance,
your passion will increase.
When you overflow with it,
I'll be your mate.'

'How will you do that?'

'Let's dance.
If you defeat me, if you win,
I'll be your husband.'

'*Śābāśa*, that's my boy. Let's dance, as you wish.'

'Let's get ready then, mother,' said Mādeva
and began to dance.

When he stamped his foot, so did she.
When he lifted a leg, so did she.
She did not see through
Mādeśvara's stratagem.
She danced
better than Mādeva, harder and harder.
All she wanted was to defeat him.
Streams of sweat ran down her body.
Her hair longer than two arms came loose
like a haystack.
She had no care even for her modesty.
She danced and danced.

Then, as he was getting tired,
our father the wizard placed his own right hand
on his head.

She too forgetfully
placed her right hand on her head, and at once
she went up in flames, did the Great Mother.

Even as she burned, she came towards him saying,
'My son, I brought you forth,
but you are greater than me.

Take my eye of fire.'
And she wanted to give him the Eye, but he thought,
'Ādiśakti will burn me down,' and vanished,
Maker of Seven
Hills, the solitary one.

Ādiśakti was full of grief.
'*Ayyo*! With whom can I share
this sorrow?
O eye of fire, you go now
to my son's forehead and become his third eye,'
she cried.

Then, even as she turned to ash,
she cursed Śiva:
'He refused a woman, so
may his body be stuck
with the very kind of female he refused.'

Who knows what's first?
The seed, or is it the tree?
Only Mādappa, Śiva who is Ādiśakti,
only he knows.

In the next section or *kavaṭlu* (branch), Śiva makes Brahmā and Viṣṇu rise from their ashes and tells them what he has done, how he has burned down Ādiśakti, and he shows them the heap of ash. They praise him as the first god of the world and embrace his feet.

Then Mādeva said,
'We three are Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Īśvara,
the Three Gods of the world.
We have to create three million worlds,
three million gods, human beings, demons,
kinnaras, yakṣas, Indras and Nāradas,
eighty million beings, plants and trees
and tubers, and also the oceans.

If all this is to be done,
we need women.
We must marry and rule our wives.
Kailāsa, Vaikuṇṭha, and Brahmaloka
are yet to be created.
Let's not throw
away the ashes of our mother,
but share them.'

The three of them went and stood
before the ashes, now divided
into three heaps.
Śiva held out the ring
that the Great Mother had given him
and placed it once on each of the heaps.

Out of them
rose three women:
Pārvatī who is Isnu's sister, Sarasvatī
who is Śiva's sister, Lakṣmī
who is Brahmā's sister.
Śiva married
the first,
Brahmā married the second, and Isnu the third.

Then each said to the other,
'I've given my sister in marriage to you,
and married your sister.
We are brothers-in-law to each other
in more ways than one.
Let's create the worlds.'

Then Śiva created heaven and three paradises,
Vaikuṇṭha, Brahmaloka, and Kailāsa
the first for Isnu and Lakṣmī,
the second for Brahmā and Sarasvatī,
the third for Śiva and Pārvatī.

In heaven, he created eighty(?) million beings, gods, men, demons,
birds, ants, chameleons, lizards, snakes, scorpions, bushes,
reeds, trees, plants, tubers.

Then our father the wizard
Mādeva called all living beings and said to them,
'Children, you will not suffer
old age or death, you will not suffer hunger
or thirst.
One thing but: you should not eat the plants,
break the trees or pluck the fruit.
If you do, you'll be in trouble.'

All the eighty
million creatures listened to him,
shook their heads in assent
and said,
'We'll do as you wish.
You are the lord of the world.'

Among these eighty million,
there were cats and hens as well.
One day, when the hen laid an egg,
the snake looked at it
and wanted to eat it.

But he knew
that Śiva had asked them to eat nothing.
'But I want to eat that egg,' he said to himself
and went to the gods.
He tried to persuade them
to eat the grain, the plants and trees
and become strong.
But they were angry with him.
They drove him
away, saying, 'This black snake
will not only ruin himself, he
will destroy all of us.'

Then he went to where the demons
and humans were sitting around.
He called out to them. 'People,
this is not fair:
We don't have the strength
that the gods have. If
we can eat the grain
and the leaves and the fruits here, we will
become strong.

That's why Śiva has ordered us not to eat anything.
This is not good for us.
If we want more strength we must eat.
Śiva too deceives.
Let's go against what he said,
and eat food.'

The demons and men felt the desire to eat.
They began to pull off
and eat seeds, twigs, leaves, bark, and all.
The serpent devoured the egg.
They all made a mess of heaven.
It stank of dirt and shit.

Mādeva became aware of the way
men and demons had become low beings.
He cursed them: 'You widows' sons,

I gave you
no thirst, no hunger.
You went against my orders
and you have made heaven a dirty
stinking place.
You are not fit to live there.'

He summoned Brahmā and said,
'These demons and men have spoiled
heaven,
they have ravaged the plants and eaten them.
Let us move
them from there.
Create the earth and cast them down there.'

The *rākṣasas* and human beings heard this
and came running.
They fell on his feet and pleaded.
'Lord, why do you want to throw us
out? It is not our fault.
It is all the fault of that snake
that's lying there.'

Mādeva said to Brahmā, 'Create a netherworld
and send that snake there.'
Then the snake woke up and pleaded.
'Why are you sending me to
the netherworld?
I talked to them but they listened.
They are the ones who ate everything, and now
they are carrying tales against me.'

Mādeva said, 'You can't escape punishment.
You can't say it isn't
your fault.
And I can't take back my curse.
I'll let you be in two
places,
in the netherworld and also round my neck.'

Brahmā created the earth and sent demons and humans
and many other beings there.
When the demons and humans grieved and cried
aloud, Śiva said,
'People, if you remember me with devotion, and
behave yourselves, I'll protect you in times of trouble.'

At the very end, a line of ants came to Śiva.
'You are sending us
also to the earth.
All the other centuries are so big, but we are
so small.
What sin have we committed?
You must be fair, show us
the way.'
Śiva said, 'Dear ants, that's what's given to you.
Don't ask for more. Ask for something else.'
They said, 'Lord,
the big creatures kill us
because we are so small.
Give our bodies
some poison.
Let there be a death every time we bite.'
Śiva got angry. 'You sinners,
if I fill you with poison, will you
spare my world?
You've asked quite a boon.

All right, whenever you
bite anything, there will be a death,
yours!'

Inversions. In the Vedas and elsewhere, Brahmā, the creator, lusts after his daughter. But here, the creator-deity is female and she lusts after her sons. While in the other Purāṇas, the gods give their powers and weapons to the goddess, here it is the goddess who gives her powers and her eye of fire to Śiva. (In other versions, e.g., in Telugu, she gives all three major gods their insignia.)

In the story of Mohini and Bhasmāsura, Viṣṇu appears as a female dancer and tricks a demon into putting his own hand on his head, which act destroys him by his own power: he has received a boon from Śiva that enables him to burn down anything by placing his hand on it. Here the genders are reversed: Śiva plays the same trick on his mother.

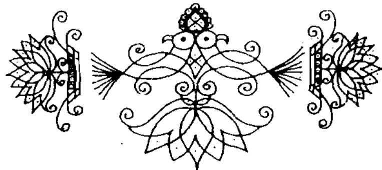
In the Vedic Indraśatru story, Vṛtra gets literally the boon he asks for and destroys himself. Vṛtra wants to kill Indraśatru, which means 'Indra the enemy' or 'Indra's enemy,' depending on the accent (the latter being himself): he puts the accent on the wrong syllable and is promptly destroyed. Here a very similar motif is employed to teach the ants a lesson.

One may go on, but I think I've said enough to suggest the way the folk

Purāṇa reworks motifs from the Purāṇic pool. The myth here, like other women-centred folk-materials, also suggests a very feminine (even a feminist) view of the Hindu pantheon: the source of all creation was a woman, who is tricked out of her powers by her son, destroyed, divided and domesticated into three lesser, docile, consort goddesses for the three gods, Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā. Though they refuse to sleep with their mother, refusing to break the incest-taboo when she asks them to, they marry fragments of her once her powers are transferred to Śiva and she herself is reduced to ashes. Out of her ashes, they remake three manageable wives. They marry their mother, but only after fragmenting her.

Lastly, one may note a Genesis-like story of a paradise lost through the cunning and disobedience of a snake—though, here, characteristically, there is no taboo on sex. Biblical motifs (spread, no doubt, by local missionaries preaching in the mother-tongues) no less than the Purāṇic ones are part of the intertextual weave.

Who Needs Folklore?



THE RELEVANCE OF ORAL TRADITIONS TO SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES

In the last few years I've been writing a series of interlocking papers on the subject of Indian folklore using Kannada and Tamil examples from my field notes.[1] Now I will touch on a number of issues I've touched on before, refine them further, relate them to other issues, and generally bring them into a unified perspective. My theme is not folklore in general but Indian folklore within the context of Indian studies, and these words are addressed to my colleagues in that field. I wish also to do several things: (1) give a state-of-the-art report on the field of Indian folklore; (2) clarify some notions and add some; and (3) generally ask and answer questions about what the study of folklore, as a subject-matter and as a discipline, would do to some of the notions of humanists and social scientists about Indian civilisation.

When some years ago I first approached this subject—the place of folklore in the study of Indian civilisation—I heard a little skeptical voice from my past say 'Folklore? Who needs folklore? Old wives' tales and peasant superstitions, who needs them?' As you know, the past never quite passes. We may hear that voice again. Here, I'm going to take that question literally and answer it.

WHY FOLKLORE?

For starters, I for one need folklore as an Indian studying India. It pervades my childhood, my family, my community. It is the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of me and my culture. Even in a large modern city like Bombay or Madras, even in Western-style nuclear families with their 2.2 children, folklore is only a suburb away, a cousin or a

grandmother away. One of the best folk-plays I've seen was performed in the back streets of Madras city by *terukkuttu* troupes. When a friend of mine in Bangalore, the capital city of Karnataka state, said to me, 'How can you collect folklore in a big city?' I asked him to try an experiment. He was a professor of Kannada, and he had a composition class that afternoon at his college. I asked him to set a composition exercise to his class of urban students. Each of them should write down a folktale they had heard and never read. That evening, my friend sought me out excitedly to show me a sheaf of forty tales his students had written down for him in class from memory.

I shall not speak here of Indian urban folklore, for wherever people live folklore grows—new jokes, proverbs (like the new campus proverb, 'To xerox is to know'), tales and songs circulate in the oral tradition. Similar to chain-letters, Murphy's Law, and graffiti, folklore may also circulate on paper or on latrine walls (Dundes and Pagter 1978). You don't have to go to Pompeii to see graffiti. Verbal folklore, in the sense of a largely oral tradition with specific genres (such as proverb, riddle, lullaby, tale, ballad, prose narrative, verse, or a mixture of both, and so on), non-verbal materials (such as dances, games, floor or wall designs, objects of all sorts from toys to outdoor giant clay-horses), and composite performing arts (which may include several of the former as in street magic and theater)—all weave in and out of every aspect of living city, village and small town. What we separate as art, economics and religion is moulded and expressed here. Aesthetics, ethos and worldview are shaped in childhood and throughout one's early life by these verbal and non-verbal environments. In a largely non-literate culture, everyone—poor, rich, high caste and low caste, professor, pundit or ignoramus—has inside him or her a large non-literate subcontinent.

In a south Indian folktale, also told elsewhere, one dark night an old woman was searching intently for something in the street. A passerby asked her, 'Have you lost something?'

> She said, 'Yes, I've lost some keys. I've been looking for them all evening.'
> 'Where did you lose them?'
> 'I don't know. Maybe inside the house.'
> 'Then, why are you looking for them here?'
> 'Because it's dark in there. I don't have oil in my lamps. I can see much better here under the street lights,' she said.

Until recently many studies of Indian civilisation have been done on that principle: look for it under the light, in Sanskrit, in literary texts, in

what we think are the well-lit public spaces of the culture, in things we already know. There we have, of course, found precious things. Without carrying the parable too far one may say we are now moving inward, trying to bring lamps into the dark rooms of the house to look for our keys. As often happens, we may not find the keys and may have to make new ones, but we will find all sorts of things we never knew we had lost, or ever even had.

INDIAN REGIONAL LANGUAGES

Four centuries ago, just a century after Vasco da Gama landed on the west coast of India, just decades after Gutenberg had printed his first Bible in Europe, Christian evangelists had begun to study our mother-tongues, compile dictionaries, make grammars and even print them in India. Yet, until recently, Sanskrit almost exclusively represented India to most people in the West.

In America, it was only about twenty-five years ago that universities began to study Indian regional languages. At least three or four major languages, such as Tamil, Hindi and Bengali, began to appear in course-listings. Both linguists and anthropologists went to these language-regions, studied the languages in the field and wrote about the texts and the cultures. These languages are only a minute fraction of those spoken in the subcontinent. In the 1971 census more than 3,000 mother tongues were recorded with the names of the speech, varieties that the speakers said they spoke. Linguists have classified and subsumed these speech varieties, or dialects, under 105 or so languages which belong to four language-families. Of these 105 languages, 90 are spoken by less than 5 per cent of the entire population; 65 belong to small tribes. Including Sanskrit, 15 of the languages are written, read and spoken by about 95 per cent of the people. We, in universities outside India, have just begun to study a few of these 15 languages.

The literatures of these 15, some of which have long histories, are just beginning to be taught and translated. Literature in a language like Tamil goes back 2,000 years, and in several others, like Bengali and Gujarati, at least 800 years. In addition to these literatures there are oral traditions, riddles, proverbs, songs, ballads, tales, epics and so on, in each of the 3,000-odd mother-tongues that we have classified under the 105 languages. It is true, as they say, a language is a dialect that has acquired an army, but all these myriad dialects carry oral literature, which is what I call folklore. One way of defining verbal folklore for India is to say it is

the literature of the dialects, those mother-tongues of the village, street, kitchen, tribal hut, and wayside tea-shop. This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literatures rest.

We have valued and attended only to the top of the pyramid. Robert Redfield, the Chicago anthropologist who influenced Indian anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s, said, 'In a civilisation, there is a great tradition of the reflective few and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many' (Redfield 1960, 41). That is a famous formulation that deserves to be infamous. Traditionally Indians also make a distinction between *mārga*, 'the high road', and *desi*, 'the byway, the country road', in their discussion of the arts. The 'Great Tradition', with capitals and in the singular, said to be carried by Sanskrit, is pan-Indian, prestigious, ancient, authorised by texts, cultivated and carried by what Redfield calls 'the reflective few'. The 'Little Tradition', or traditions in the plural, are local, mostly oral, and carried by the illiterate (the liberal would call them non-literate) and the anonymous 'unreflective many'. Redfield himself and Milton Singer later modified these notions and others have been critical of them. They were seminal at one time, especially because they urged anthropologists not to ignore the 'texts' of a culture in favour of 'fieldwork'.

CULTURAL PERFORMANCES AS TEXTS

Now we need a new emphasis, a larger view regarding texts themselves, as text-theory in literary criticism and philosophical analysis urge us to do. Written and hallowed texts are not the only kinds of texts in a culture like the Indian. Oral traditions of every kind produce texts. 'Cultural performances' (Singer 1972, 47) of every sort, whether they are written or oral acts of composition, whether they are plays weddings, rituals or games, contain texts. Every cultural performance not only creates and carries texts, it is a text.

When we look at texts this wa, we can modify terms such as *great* and *little* traditions and see all these performances as a transitive series, a 'scale of forms' (a phrase in a different context, from Collingwood 1933) responding to one another, engaged in continuous and dynamic dialogic relations. Past and present, what's 'pan-Indian' and what's local, what's shared and what's unique in regions, communities, and individuals, the written and the oral—all are engaged in a dialogic reworking and redefining of relevant others. Texts then are also contexts and pretexts for other

texts (Ramanujan 1989). In our studies now we are beginning to recognise and place folk-texts in this ever-present network of intertextuality. For folk texts are pervasive, behind, under, around all the texts of our society, and in all its strata, not merely among the rural and the illiterate, the 'unreflective many'. City and village, factory and kitchen, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, Christian and Muslim, king, priest and clown, the crumbling almanac and the runaway computer—all are permeated by oral traditions, tales, jokes, beliefs and rules of thumb not yet found in books. I shall say more later about the dialogic relation between folklore and other parts of this Indian cultural continuum.

INTERACTIVE PAN-INDIAN SYSTEMS

In the view being developed here, even what's called the Great Tradition is not singular but plural—it is a set of interactive pan-Indian systems, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, with *tantra* and *bhakti* interacting variously with these. To be comprehensive we should add Islam, Christianity, et cetera, and modernity itself as the other active systems that participate in this give-and-take. (For a fuller development of this idea, see Ramanujan 1989.)

Let's examine briefly the idea that some traditions are pan-Indian and some are not. Sanskrit and Prakrit, though they have a pan-Indian distribution, still originate in particular regions; Sanskrit itself, though translocal and apparently a-geographic, has varieties of pronunciation that can be identified as Bengali, Malayali or Banarasi (Staal 1961). Nor are the so-called 'Little Traditions', especially folk traditions, necessarily or usually confined to small localities or dialectal communities. Proverbs, riddles, and stories, and tunes, motifs, and genres of songs and dances are not confined to a region, even though they may be embodied in the non-literate dialects and may seem to be enclosed in those mythic entities called self-sufficient village communities. It is well known that folklore items, like many other sorts of items in cultural exchange, are autotelic, that is, they travel by themselves without any actual movement of populations. A proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy, or a recipe travels every time it is told. It crosses linguistic boundaries any time it is told. It crosses linguistic boundaries any time a bilingual tells it or hears it.

Neighbouring languages and regions have, therefore, a large stock of shared folk-materials. Collections, for instance, have been made of the proverbs shared by the four Dravidian languages. Similar ones can be made for other genres and for other neighbouring language-areas, and indeed for the whole subcontinent. A proverb such as 'It's dark under the lamp' (*dipada kelage kattale*, in Kannada) has been collected in Kannada and in Kashmiri, at two ends of the Indian subcontinent. The sentence is the same in each place, but it means different things. The reference is the same, but the sense is different. In Kannada it means that a virtuous man, like a lighted lamp, may have dark hidden vices. In Kashmiri, I'm told, 'It's dark under the lamp' has a political sense—that a good-natured king may have evil counsellors. This is, of course, characteristic of cultural forms. The signifiers, of which even the so-called structures and archetypes are instances, may be the same in different periods and regions, but the signification may go on changing. You cannot predict the one from the other. For the meaning of a sign is culturally and contextually assigned. A sign requires an assignment.

Not only do folklore items—arising and current in apparently narrow incommunicable corners and very localised dialects—travel within the country or culture area, they are also part of an international network. Archer Taylor's *English Riddles* (1951) gives us current English riddles and their centuries-old written variants, as well as variants from Africa, India, and the New World. One can collect today, as I know from experience, oral tales from illiterate women in Kannada villages that are similar, motif for motif, to the tales of the Greek *Oedipus* or to Shakespeare's *King Lear* or *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Here we begin to glimpse a paradox: where the so-called pan-Indian Hindu mythologies of Viṣṇu or Śiva, or the great classics like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* are unique to India, folklore items such as proverbs and tales participate in an international network of motifs, genres, types, and structures—using them all, of course, to say something particular, local, and unique. One arrives at the paradox that the classics of a culture, like the well-wrought epics or plays and poetry, are culture-bound forms, but large portions of the so-called little traditions are not. The latter mould and express the values and concerns of the culture nonetheless. Their forms, their signifiers, however, are not ethno-centred.

One has to resort to subterfuge and theoretical acrobatics to compare the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the Greek *Iliad* or invoke ancient Indo-European structures (such as the tripartite division of priest, warrior and service classes) as Dumezil (1968) does. But the comparison of Cinderella tales from China to Peru begins with transparent structural resemblances

and may end with significant contrast between one culture's assignment of meanings and another's (Ramanujan 1983). Unfortunately, comparatists have not paid attention to Indian folklore and folklorists have usually stopped at identifying types, rarely going further to ask questions of cultural significance. Detailed comparative studies of particular proverbs, tales and so on, for which there are well-attested comparative materials, are called for and would greatly enhance our understanding of what is specifically Indian or Tamil or Bengali. Because some of these tales, for example, can be identified in European languages, classical Sanskrit and in our mother tongues, we can arrive at a most useful three-way comparison between what is Indian and what is Western; and within India, between what is Sanskritic and what is characteristic of a regional culture and a mother-tongue—and of course the dialogues and exchanges among these. Such triangulations, if replicated for several tales, would give us a body of unique comparative data and analyses.

WRITTEN AND ORAL MEDIA: DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONS

Folklore also raises and makes us face other central questions; for instance, questions regarding the differences and relations between written and spoken media in Indian oral culture.

The relations between oral and written traditions in any culture are not simple oppositions. They interpenetrate each other and combine in various ways. Each of us produces more oral materials in our lives than written. We begin our loves in an oral universe, learn our mother tongues orally first and imbibe our culture through it. As adults, on any day or occasion, we say much more than we write. Talk surrounds us and we talk to ourselves, not only to others, not always even silently, and often we do not even stop when we fall asleep. Our dreams are filled with speech. Yet writing is more permanent; it takes us out of a face-to-face communication and can reach people far away and centuries later, in ages unborn and accents yet unknown, as Shakespeare would say. In Sanskrit, a written letter is called *akṣara*, 'imperishable'. In India, literacy has always been restricted and today in many states is less than 30 per cent. Written traditions live surrounded by oral ones and are even carried by oral means. As in many other languages, in Kannada the word for writing (*bare*) is the same as that for drawing; and until recently to read meant to read aloud. I've heard of a grand-uncle who would say he couldn't read a novel because he had a sore throat. So, too, to write meant to write down. Writing was an *aide memoir*, a mnemonic device, for materials to be rendered oral again. Speech lies dormant in writing until it is awakened again by one's own or another's voice, like these words on this page as you or I read them.

Sometimes it is thought that the so-called classical texts are fixed and the so-called folk-texts are constantly changing. Similarly, writing is thought to be fixed and speech constantly changing. One often identifies the 'classical' with the written and the 'folk' with the oral. But, for India, we should distinguish between three sets of independent oppositions. We may then proceed to examine, complicate and dissolve them. The three are classical vs. folk, written vs. spoken, fixed vs. free or fluid. The classical, the written and the fixed do not necessarily belong together. A text like the Veda is fixed but was not written down until two thousand years after its composition. The Vedas were esoteric and credited with magical properties that would devastate anyone who mispronounced them. They were transmitted orally but rigorously in elaborate teaching systems from *guru* to disciple. Pundits and Vedic experts had what Narayana Rao calls 'oral literacy'; they used an almost entirely oral medium, but were learned in grammar, syntax, logic, and poetics. Their literacy was, as it were, imbued in their bodies. We speak of a learned man having all his texts in his throat, *kanṭhastha*; when one is ignorant, one is called 'a fellow who has no letters in his belly' or a *nirakṣarakukṣī*.

Although such oral literacy produced texts that were carefully preserved verbatim, allowing little change, a text like an epic story in the written tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* seems to allow endless variations. Hundreds of versions exist, written, sung, danced and sculpted in South and Southeast Asian languages. Though I would insist that each of these many tellings should be treated as a separate (often fixed) text, it is still remarkable that the orally transmitted Vedas should be remarkably fixed and the written *Rāmāyaṇas* should take such liberties with the story and should be almost as fluid as an oral folktale. The contrast will become clear when we compare the great Indian epics with the great Western texts. Imagine a Shakespeare play or Homer's *Odyssey* having as many widely differing versions in different ages and languages. We cannot jump from this to the paradox that in India the oral is invariably fixed and the written is what is fluid. The fixed and the fluid, or what should be called fixed-phrase and free-phrase forms, exist in both written and spoken texts.

Language, like other communication systems, depends on both fixed or invariant forms and free or variant ones. Without the one the system

would not be stable; without the other it would not be capable of change, adaptation, creativity. Our ordinary language is full of fixed forms, not only in terms of underlying structures at every level, but even in lexical combinations. To give just one example, idioms like 'he kicked the bucket' cannot be changed for tense, article, or number. Any variation such as 'he is kicking the bucket; he is kicking a bucket; they are kicking buckets; he has been kicking the bucket for a week now' would all be ungrammatical, mean other things, and be seen as funny. In language, as we move from phonology to syntax, we become freer and freer in combinatory possibilities. Still, some things are not subject to variation and not open to innovation. Not even Shakespeare or Kalidasa, acknowledged masters and not servants of their languages, can make a new pronoun or add a tense to the language. When writers like Joyce try to take such liberties, they achieve such specialised effects that they require glossaries and notes, and explication quickly becomes a cult and a cottage-industry.

In discourse too different genres allow different degrees of fixity and freedom. Where the written form is only a mnemonic, a score to be performed orally, it is used freely for improvisation. The texts of a Yakṣagāna performance or a Kathakali performance are hardly a few pages long, but an actual performance may take a whole night. The text of a song may be only a few lines long, but when sung may take an hour, and usually does. On the other hand, orally transmitted texts have fixed components, formulae, refrains, obligatory descriptive passages, and traditionally defined motifs and narrative structures. Different genres have different proportions of these; for example, a proverb is an entirely fixed-phrase form within a speech community. One can play on its fixity to produce new effects as wits like Oscar Wilde did: 'Nothing succeeds like excess', or 'Work is the curse of the drinking classes', or my favourite, 'All's well that ends'. In a joke, everything may be free, but the punchline may be fixed—to garble it would be to muff the joke. A folksong would have practically every word fixed, except performance elements like the number of repetitions, or the way a phrase is broken to accord with the musical phrase. A folktale told by a grandmother in the kitchen may have nothing at all fixed in the phrasing, only the design of the story and the sequence of motifs. Yet it may have fixed phrases, like 'Open Sesame' in the story of Ali Bābā—a phrase that his brother treats as a free phrase, with disastrous results. The Vedas are an extreme case of a 4,000-hymn cycle fixed in oral transmission, as if it were inscribed (as secret codes are in spy stories) in the transmitter's memory.

Furthermore, oral and written forms in a culture often wish to be like each other, like the two sexes, male and female, each envying what the other has. Yet each defines and marries the other. In the oral forms, in folklore, many devices such as refrains, formulae and memory-training exist to give the relative permanence of writing. From time to time, in writing traditions, writers wish to return to the freshness of speech and imitate it, as in modern Indian (and other) poetry. Flaubert, master of the written word who waited for days for the *mot juste*, is the exemplar of the opposite end of the oral arts, where to hesitate is to be lost. Yet it was Flaubert who said that style should be adjusted to the rhythms of respiration.

In all cultures, and especially in the Indian, the oral and the written are deeply intermeshed in another way. If we distinguish composition and transmission, as Ruth Finnegan (1977) reminds us we should, we find that in the history of a text, oral and written means may alternate. A work may be composed orally but transmitted in writing, as Vyāsa said he did with Gaṇeśa as his scribe. Or it may be composed in writing, as Kumāravyāsa (Vyāsa junior) said he did in Kannada, but the text kept alive by *gamakis* or reciters who know it by heart and chant it aloud. There are of course texts, such as proverbs and tales, that are usually composed orally and orally transmitted, many of which never get written down. And texts, like newspapers—written, printed and silently scanned or read—may never go through an oral phase. Thus, over a long history, a story may go through many phases. An oral story gets written up or written down in the *Jātakas* or the *Pañcatantra*. Then (as W. Norman Brown tried to show in a famous paper) the written text may reach other audiences who pick up the story and retell it orally, maybe in other languages, and then it gets written down somewhere else, perhaps starting another cycle of transmissions. That's one kind of cycle; another may be entirely oral and may run parallel to the oral-written complex. Many of the differences in our classical texts like the *Mahābhārata* recensions, may be due to the way the texts do not simply go from one written form to another but get reworked through oral cycles that surround the written word. Western critical methods, based entirely on an examination and reconstruction of written texts, made the critical editions of Indian texts possible. But they may not be suitable for a reconstruction of the *Mahābhārata* at all. For methods of Western textual criticism aim at making tree-diagrams, relating one written version to another, demonstrating that one came directly from another, reaching back to a single Ur-text. Texts like the *Mahābhārata* may not have a reconstructable Ur-text at all, enmeshed as they were in oral traditions at various stages of their composition and transmission.

In a folktale told about Aristotle in Europe and about a philosopher in

India, the philosopher meets a village carpenter who has a beautiful old knife, and asks him, 'How long have you had this knife?' The carpenter answers, 'Oh, this knife has been in our family for generations. We have changed the handle a few times and the blade a few times, but it is the same knife.' Similarly, the structure of relations may remain constant, while all the cultural details change, as in a folktale that goes on changing from teller to teller. Any fixity, any reconstructed archetype, is a fiction, a label, a convenience.

ORAL TRADITIONS: THE DIFFERENCE THEY MAKE

Thus anyone concerned with written texts has to reckon with the oral materials that surround it. This contrasts strikingly with modern America, where the end of any formal oral communication is a written text. You speak in Congress so that your speech may be read into the *Congressional Record*; everything anybody says in a court is typed up; and at the end of what's supposed to be spontaneous conversation on a TV talk show, you get the message, 'Send three dollars to such and such and you can get the transcript of this show.' And finally the most popular TV game show, 'Wheel of Fortune', has to do with spelling words and phrases. Every letter is cashed into dollars, every phrase into furniture and a trip to Hawai'i. In a culture like the Indian, however, and certainly in villages and certain communities to this day, writing lives within the context of *oral* traditions. Even newspapers are read aloud. If you have been near any primary school in a small town or even in Madras, you would hear the pupils a mile away, for the classes recite their lessons in a loud chorus. Not only the alphabet and the multiplication tables, but every major religious or literary text like the *Rāmāyaṇa* is memorised and chanted aloud. As Philip Lutgendorf (1987) has shown, in a Chicago doctoral dissertation, Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* is the focus of cults, festivals, formal and informal recitations, tableaus and oral forays into interpretations of the most wide-ranging and ingenious kinds. The author and the text themselves are the subject of innumerable tales. Every text like that creates a textual community held together by oral traditions as well as written ones. Scholars are just now realising that this interweaving of the oral and written is true of the Quran and the Bible as well (Graham 1987). But the Indian examples have needed no pointing out, except of course to scholars like ourselves. As a proverb in Kannada says, 'Why do we need a mirror to see a blister on our hands?' Yet, we seem to, for we believe in the mirror of writing, or even better, the mirror of print.

Oral traditions thus enlarge the range and they complicate and balance the texts we know. Yet we ignore the oral. Take mythology, for instance. At present, in all our anthologies of Hindu mythology there is not one folk-myth. Every text is from the Sanskrit, though myths occur in Tamil and Bengali and every other language. They even occur in scores of written texts like the *sthalapurāṇas*, which David Shulman has studied (1980), or the *mañgalakāvyas* which Edward Dimock (1988) has written about. In the oral tradition, that literature without letters *(eluta eluttu)*, there are hundreds more. As Alf Hiltebeital's work on Draupadi eloquently demonstrates (1988), they complement the Sanskritic myths and epics in important ways. Oral traditions give us alternative conceptions of deities that balance and complete, and therefore illuminate the textual conceptions. For instance, the goddesses of pan-Indian mythologies, like Lakśmi and Saraswatī, rise out of the sea churned by the gods and the antigods; Pārvatī is the daughter of the King of Mountains. They are consort-goddesses; their shrines are subordinate to those of their spouses, Viṣṇu or Śiva. Their images are carefully sculpted to the fingertips. They are usually *saumya* or mild and docile. They preside over the normal auspicious cycles of life, especially marriage, prosperity and such.

But look at the village goddesses and see how different they are. Their myths tell us of ordinary human women who were cheated into marrying untouchables, or raped by a local villain, or killed and buried by cruel brothers. Out of such desecrations they rise in fury, grow in stature to become figures that span heaven and earth, with powers of destruction that terrify the village into submission, sacrifice and worship. Theirs are not myths of descent or *avatāra*, but of ascent from the human into divine forms. They become boundary-goddesses of the village, give it their name, or take their names from the village. While the Sanskritic Breast Goddesses (as I call them because they give us their breasts) receive vegetarian offerings of fruit and flowers, these village goddesses require animal sacrifices and a sprinkle of blood on their devotees. The Tooth Goddesses represent the other side of the mother (as stepmothers do, in folktales), who punish, afflict people with plague and pox, and when propitiated heal the afflicted. They are goddesses of the disrupted lifecycle, deities of crisis; they preside over famine, plague, death, and madness. Their images are often pots and pans, faceless stones, sometimes only

a severed head. They dwell outside the village boundaries and are brought in only for special worship, often in times of crisis. Without them, life is not complete, nor is the Hindu view of the divine.

The goddess Kāli, as the Sanskrit texts present her, is a Sankritised version of hundreds of village goddesses all over the country and certainly partakes of their fierce aspects. Yet, in the Sanskrit *purāṇas* (encyclopedias of Hindu myths) and myths based on them, Kāli is created by the gods pooling their weapons and powers and let loose on the Buffalo Demon whom the male deities cannot destroy. The emphases, details, and major themes of the village mythologies are quite different. The village *Mariyamman* goddess arises out of human deception and tragedy. If the Breast Goddesses are consorts to their male spouses, the Tooth Goddess is often a virgin and, if married, she tears her villainous male consort to pieces. He is later symbolically offered as a buffalo or goat sacrifice to her images. The consort-goddesses are auspicious, consecrated. The village goddesses are ambivalent, they afflict and heal (Brubaker 1978).

Such a conception of divinity is not confined only to female deities. Consider the village gods, such as *Muttuppattan*. He is a brahman who falls in love with a cobbler chieftain's daughters, marries them, skins and tans cowhides, eats cow's flesh, dies in the battle defending his village against robbers, and becomes a god to whom his community of cobblers makes offerings (*kodai*) of gigantic leather sandals. It is one of the most moving long poems of south India. Until recently no record or translation of this tragic story was available. Now Stuart Blackburn has made an effective translation of it (1988).

I use the word *tragic* advisedly. It is customary to speak of Indian literature as having no genre of tragedy. In the Sanskritic tradition (by which I mean both works in Sanskrit and Sanskritised works in our regional languages), it is true there are no tragedies in the Greek or Shakespearean sense, though some plays of Bhāsa may be an exception. It is significant, I think, that his plays were unearthed in south India in areas where dance dramas like Kathakali developed, dramas that do not flinch from gory scenes, and where also the more tragic aspects of the *Mahābhārata* are fully enacted. Our sense of our literature and its possibilities would change if we included oral epics like the Tamil *villuppattus* and the Tulu *paddanas* (e.g., Claus 1989) in our studies. (Fortunately, a book of essays on Indian oral epics has just been published: Blackburn et al. 1986; see also Beck 1982; Roghair 1982). Oral epics embody a theory of emotion different from that of *rasa*, explore ranges in the emotional spectrum like shame, terror, fury and disgust that are not usually explored in the Sanskrit poems and plays. And how can we, mere mortals, do without them?

The oral traditions offer us also a different view of the female from the views found in the written texts. When the *Rāmāyaṇa* is sung by the Tamburi Dāsayyas of Mysore, the center of attention is Sītā, her birth, marriage, exile, sufferings, and final disappearance into Mother Earth. In the Tamil story of *Mayili Rāvaṇan*, set in a time after Rāma has defeated the ten-headed Rāvaṇa, a new thousand-headed Rāvaṇa arises to threaten the gods, and this time Rāma cannot handle it. It is Sītā who goes to war and demolishes the impossible demon (Shulman 1986).

In the Upaniṣadic creation myth, the Primordial Person or Puruśa is alone, needs a companion, and splits into male and female, for he is originally the same size as a man and a woman put together. Then the male pursues the female and unites with her, creating mankind. She runs from him, saying, 'I was born out of you, I cannot unite with you', and becomes a cow. He becomes a bull and unites with her, creating cattle. Then she becomes a she-goat, he a he-goat; they unite and create goats. And so on down to the ants.

But see what happens in an oral folk *purāṇa* sung ceremonially on Mādeśvara hill (Karnataka) every year by several bardic groups during the festival devoted to this hero/saint/god called Mādeśvara (Ramanujan 1985). The *purāṇa* begins with a creation myth.

The Primordial Goddess is born three days before everything else. She grows up very quickly, attains puberty, and wants a man to satisfy her. Finding no one around, she creates out of herself Brahmā, the eldest of the gods, and asks him to grow up quickly and sleep with her. But as he grows up and she urges him on, Brahmā says, 'You are my mother. How can I sleep with you?' She gets angry, calls him a eunuch, and burns him down to a heap of ash with the eye of fire in the palm of her hand. The next day, she creates Viṣṇu, who is very handsome. She can't wait for him to grow up and satisfy her. But he too will not sleep with his mother. So, in a rage, she burns him down to a heap of ash. On the third day, she creates Śiva, and urges him to grow up and become her lover. He too has misgivings until she says, 'Look around and see what happened to your brothers who refused me.' He turns around and sees the two heaps of ash that were once his brothers. He sizes up the situation and says to his mother, 'All right, I'll do as you say. You want me to be your husband, don't you? Don't you want your husband to be at least equal to you? Don't you want to teach him all your skills and give him your powers?' The Mother Goddess, Ammavaru, is delighted and says, 'Of course. I want you to have everything,' and teaches him all her magic arts and bestows on him all her powers. Then Śiva, now grown up, says, 'Let's dance. You must do whatever I do. Let's see who is better.' They whirl around in a fantastic

cosmic dance together, each mirroring the other, until suddenly, Śiva puts his hand on his head in a dance movement. His mother, following him, puts her hand on her own head and the eye of fire in her palm begins to burn her. As she burns, she curses Śiva, 'You, you refused a woman. May one half of your body become female, may you never get rid of her!' That's how Śiva came to be the lord whose one half is woman. Then as his mother burned down and became a heap of ash, the eye of fire that lived in her hand came to Śiva and said it had nowhere to go. So he took it and slapped it on his forehead. That's how he got his third eye.

After his mother had gone up in flames, Śiva looked around and found the two heaps of ash that were once his brothers. With his newly learned powers, he revived them. Now the three gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, said to each other, 'There's work to do. We must create the worlds.' One of them said, 'How can we create without women?' Then Śiva sees the third heap of ash that was once their mother, divides it into three smaller heaps, and gives them life. Out of these portions of their mother's ash, come Lakśmi, Saraswatī, and Pārvatī, the three consorts of the Hindu trinity, who then marry them. Creation begins.

In the Sanskritic myth, the male gods create the goddess and give her their powers. In the foregoing myth it is exactly in reverse. She gives Śiva his powers. In the Sanskritic myth it is the father figures that lust after the daughters. Here the female too has her share of sexual desire, made explicit. She is cheated out of her powers by the male god who uses them to destroy her. Furthermore, her sons still end up marrying portions of their mother—both Jung and Freud would be interested in that. But the male gods marry her only after fragmenting and domesticating her into a nice tame threesome—feminists would be interested in that. This is a way of looking at male/female power relations very different from anything we know from the better-known written texts.

I could go on to talk about alternative views of the gods, *karma* and chastity, as well as why tales themselves are told. Since I have talked about them elsewhere, I shall content myself with giving you some short examples. The gods in the *purāṇas* and the heroes in the epics have bodies without bodily functions: they are not supposed to sweat, urinate, defecate or pass wind. They do not blink their eyes nor do their feet touch the ground. But in folk traditions, they have bodies, they are embodied, localised, domesticated. In the place legend of *Gokarṇa* (which I heard from Girish Karnad), Rāvaṇa prays to Śiva and receives from him the boon that Śiva, with all his goblin attendants, should go with him to Lañkā. Śiva gives him the boon, but doesn't really wish to go. He tells Rāvaṇa that he can carry him as a *linga* all the way, but that he should not put it down anywhere until he reaches Lañkā. Rāvaṇa agrees. When he gets to Gokarṇa, he must answer the call of nature. He cannot hold the sacred *linga* in his hands while he takes a crap, can he? So he puts it down, and the *linga* begins to grow downwards and take root. Rāvaṇa hurries back and tries to twist it out of the earth, but he is not able to. That's how Gokarṇa has a *linga* and they say that, if you dig under it, you'll find that it's twisted. Aldous Huxley once complained that, even for a realistic novelist like Tolstoy, the heroines never go to the bathroom nor do they menstruate. In the village oral traditions, they do. Gods like Gaṇeśa, heroes like Bhīma, demons like Rāvaṇa, or even poets like Vyāsa cannot help going to the bathroom, and goddesses like Ganga and Gauri menstruate. As the *bhakti* poem says:

Bodied, one will hunger.

Bodied, one will lie.

O you, don't you rib and taunt me again for having a body:

body Thyself for once like me and see what happens,

O Ramanatha!

Devara Dāsimayya (Ramanujan 1973, 107)

Folklore that is in many ways close to *bhakti* traditions, gives to them and takes from them, sharing genres, motifs and attitudes, and seems not only to ask the gods to embody themselves, but actually envisions them as having bodies with all the needs and ills that flesh is heir to.

Folk renditions of the pan-Indian epics and myths not only bring the gods home, making the daily world mythic, they also contemporise them. In village enactments of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when Sītā has to choose her bridegroom, princes from all over the universe appear as suitors. In a North Indian folk version, an Englishman with a pith helmet, a solar topee, and a hunting rifle regularly appears as one of the suitors of Sītā. After all, since the eighteenth century the English have been a powerful presence in India and ought to have a place in any epic 'bridegroom choice' or *svayamvara*.

In a Karnataka performance,

Rāma is exiled, and as he takes the little boat on the river Sarayu to go to the jungle, all of Ayodhyā follows him in tears. He bids them farewell from his boat, making a short speech: 'O brothers and sisters, please go home now. I take leave of you now, but I'll be back in fourteen years.' Then he leaves, and wanders through the forests. Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa, Rāma gathers the monkey army, kills Rāvaṇa, and returns victorious with Sītā. When he arrives at the spot where he had bid his people farewell fourteen years earlier, he sees a group standing there, their hair grown grey, their nails long and uncut, their feet rooted to the

banks of the Sarayu. He asks them who they are. They say. 'O Rāma, you forgot us when you took leave. You bade farewell only to the men and women, calling them brothers and sisters. We are the eunuchs of Ayodhyā. We have waited for you here all these fourteen years.' Rāma is very touched by their devotion and, feeling guilty at his negligence, gives them a boon: 'O eunuchs of Ayodhyā, may you be reborn in India again and rule the country as the next Congress party!' (Ramanujan 1986)

I can go on forever, detailing what happens to *karma* or chastity in the oral tales, retelling the bawdy tales of the villages about clever women who cheat on their husbands and get away with it, unlike all the chaste women of the epics who never cheat or the unchaste ones who are chastened by their infidelity like Ahalyā. But I think I've said enough to argue the essential relevance of folklore to Indian studies and the alternative views and systems folklore carries. Folk materials also comment continually on official and orthodox views and practices in India. So I wish to end with a satiric tale about kings, *gurus* and disciples, the legal process, belief in rebirth, and the very logic of *karma* that looks for causes in infinite regress. I shall tell it without any further comment than that here, if we listen, we can hear the voice of what is fashionably called the subaltern—the woman, the peasant, the non-literate, those who are marginal to the courts of kings and offices of the bureaucrats, the centres of powers.[2]

IN THE KINGDOM OF FOOLISHNESS[3]

In the kingdom of foolishness, both the king and the minister were idiots. They didn't want to run things like other kings. So they decided to change night into day and day into night. They ordered everyone to be awake at night, till their fields and run their businesses only after dark; and they should all go to bed as soon as the sun came up. If anyone disobeyed, he would be punished with death. The people did as they were told for fear of death. The king and the minister were delighted at the success of their project.

A *guru* and a disciple arrived in the city. It was a beautiful city, it was broad daylight, but there was no one about. Everyone was asleep, not a mouse stirring. Even the cattle had been taught to sleep. The two strangers were amazed by what they saw and wandered around till evening, when suddenly the whole town woke up and went about its daily business.

The two men were hungry. Now that the shops were open, they went to buy some groceries. To their astonishment, they found that everything cost the same, a single *duddu* (a small coin)—whether they bought a measure of rice or a bunch of bananas, it cost a *duddu*. The *guru* and his disciple were delighted. They had never heard of anything like this. They could buy all the food they wanted for a rupee.

When they had cooked the food and eaten, the *guru* realised that this was a kingdom of fools and it wouldn't be a good idea for them to stay here. 'This is no place for us. Let's go,' he said to his disciple. But the disciple didn't want to leave the place. Everything was cheap here. All he wanted was good cheap food. The *guru* said, 'They are all fools. This won't last very long and one can't tell what they'll do to you next.'

But the disciple wouldn't listen to the *guru's* wisdom. He wanted to stay. The *guru* finally gave in and said, 'Do what you want. I'm going,' and he left. The disciple stayed on, ate his fill everyday, bananas and ghee and rice and wheat, and grew fat as a streetside sacred bull.

One bright day, a thief broke into a rich merchant's house. He had made a hole in the wall, sneaked in, and as he was carrying out his loot, the wall of the old house collapsed on his head and killed him on the spot. His brother ran to the king and complained: 'Your Highness, when my brother was pursuing his ancient trade, a wall fell on him and killed him. This merchant is to blame. He should have built a good strong wall. You must punish the wrong-doer and compensate the family for this injustice.'

The king said, 'Justice will be done. Don't worry,' and at once summoned the owner of the house.

When the merchant arrived, the king asked him questions.

'What's your name?'

'Such and such, Your Highness.'

'Were you at home when the dead man burgled you house?'

'Yes, my lord. He broke in and the wall was weak. It fell on him.'

'The accused pleads guilty. Your wall killed this man's brother. You have murdered a man. We have to punish you.'

'Lord,' said the helpless merchant. 'I didn't put up the wall. It's really the fault of the man who built the wall. He didn't build it right. You should punish him.'

'Who is that?'

'My lord, this wall was built in my father's time. I know the man. He's an old man now. He lives nearby.'

The king sent out messengers to bring in the bricklayer who had built the wall. They brought him tied hand and foot.

'You there, did you build this man's wall in his father's time?'

'Yes, my lord, I did.'

'What kind of wall is this that you built? It has fallen on a poor man and killed him. You've murdered him. We have to punish you by death.'

Before the king could order the execution, the poor bricklayer pleaded, 'Please listen to me before you give your orders. It's true I built this wall and it was no good. But that was because my mind was not on it. I remember very well a harlot who was going up and down that street all day with her anklets jingling and I couldn't keep my eyes or my mind on the wall I was building. You must get that harlot. I know where she lives.'

'You're right. The case deepens. We must look into it. It is not easy to judge such complicated cases. Let's get that harlot wherever she is.'

The harlot, now an old woman, came trembling to the court.

'Did you walk up and down that street many years ago, while this poor man was building this wall? Did you see him?'

'Yes, my lord. I remember it very well.'

'So you did walk up and down, with your anklets jingling. You were young and you tempted him. So he built a bad wall. It has fallen on a poor burglar and killed him. You've killed an innocent man. You'll have to be punished.'

She thought for a minute and said, 'My lord, wait. I know now why I was walking up and down that street. I had given some gold to the goldsmith to make some jewellery for me. He was a lazy scoundrel. He made so many excuses, said he would give it now and he would give it then and so on all day. He made me walk up and down to his house a dozen times. That was when this bricklayer fellow saw me. It's not my fault, my lord, it's that damned goldsmith's.'

'Poor thing, she's absolutely right,' thought the king, weighing the evidence. 'We've got the real culprit at last. Get the goldsmith wherever he is hiding. At once!'

The king's bailiffs searched for the goldsmith who was hiding in a corner of his shop. When he heard the accusation against him, he had his own story to tell.

'My lord,' he said, 'I'm a poor goldsmith. It's true I made this harlot woman come many times to my door. I gave her excuses because I couldn't finish making her jewellery before I finished the rich merchant's orders. They had a wedding coming, and they wouldn't wait. You know how impatient rich men are!'

'Who is this rich merchant who kept you from finishing this poor woman's jewellery, made her walk up and down, which distracted this bricklayer, which made a mess of his wall, which has now fallen on an innocent man and killed him? Can you name him?'

The goldsmith named the merchant and he was none other than the original owner of the house where the wall had fallen. Now justice had come full circle, thought the king, back to the merchant. When he was rudely summoned back to the court, he arrived crying, 'It's not me, but my father who ordered the jewellery! He's dead! I'm innocent!'

But the king consulted his minister and ruled decisively, 'It's true your father is the true murderer. He's dead but somebody must be punished in his place. You've inherited everything from that criminal father of yours, his riches as well as his sins. I knew at once, even when I set eyes on you that you were at the root of this horrible crime. You must die.'

And he ordered a new stake to be made ready for the execution. As the servants sharpened the stake and got it ready for final impaling of the criminal, it occurred to the minister that the rich merchant was somehow too thin to be properly executed by the stake. He appealed to the king's common sense. The king too worried about it.

'What shall we do?' he said, when suddenly it struck him that all they needed to do was to get a man fat enough to fit the stake. The servants were immediately all over town looking for a man who would fit the stake, and their eyes fell on the disciple who had fattened himself for months on bananas and rice and wheat and ghee.

'What have I done wrong? I'm innocent. I'm a *saṃnyāsī*!' he cried.

'That may be true. But it's the royal decree that we should find a man fat enough to fit the stake,' they said, and carried him to the place of execution. He remembered his wise *guru's* words: 'This is a city of fools. You don't know what they will do next.' While he was waiting for death, he prayed to his *guru* in his heart, asking him to hear his cry wherever he was. The *guru* saw everything in a vision. He had magical powers; he could see far and he could see the future as he could see the present and the past. He arrived at once to save his disciple who had gotten himself into a scrape again through love of food.

As soon as he arrived, he scolded the disciple and told him something in a whisper. Then he went to the king and addressed him.

'O wisest of kings, who is greater? The *guru* or the disciple?'

'Of course the *guru*. No doubt about it. Why do you ask?'

'Then put me to the stake first. Put my disciple to death after me.'

When the disciple heard this, he caught on and began to clamour.

'Me first! You brought me here first! Put me to death first, not him!'

The *guru* and the disciple now got in a fight about who should go first. The king was puzzled by this behaviour. He asked the *guru*, 'Why do you want to die? We chose him because we needed a fat man for the stake.'

'You shouldn't ask me such questions. Put me to death first.'

'Why? There's some mystery here. As a wise man you must make me understand.'

'Will you promise to put me to death, if I tell you?' said the *guru*. The king gave him his solemn word. The *guru* took him aside, out of the servant's earshot, and whispered to him, 'Do you know why we want to die right now, the two of us? We've been all over the world but we've never found a city like this or a king like you. That stake is the stake of the god of justice. It's new, it has never had a criminal on it. Whoever dies on it first will be reborn as the king of this country. And whoever goes next will be the future minister of this country. We're sick of living the ascetic life. It would be nice to enjoy ourselves as king and minister for a while. Now keep your word, my lord, and put us to death. Me first, remember.'

The king was now thrown into deep thought. He didn't want to lose the kingdom to someone else in the next round of life. He needed time. So he ordered the execution postponed till the next day and talked in secret with his minister. 'It's not right for us to give the kingdom to others in the next life. Let's go up the stake ourselves and we'll be reborn as king and minister again. Holy men do not tell lies,' he said and the minister agreed.

So he told the executioners, 'We'll send the criminals tonight. When the first

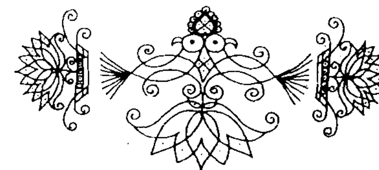
man comes to you, put him first to death. Then do the same to the second man. Those are orders. Don't make any mistakes.'

That night, they went secretly to the prison, released the *guru* and disciple, disguised themselves as the two and, as arranged beforehand with their loyal servants, were taken to the stake and promptly executed.

When the bodies were taken down to be thrown to crows and vultures the people panicked. They saw before them the dead bodies of the king and the minister. The city was in confusion.

All night they mourned and discussed the future of the kingdom. Some people suddenly thought of the *guru* and the disciple and caught up with them as they were preparing to leave the town unnoticed. We people need a king and a minister, said someone. Others agreed. They begged the *guru* and the disciple to become their king and their minister. It didn't take many arguments to persuade the disciple, but it took long to persuade the *guru*. They finally agreed to rule the kingdom of the foolish king and the silly minister, on the condition that they would change all the old laws. From then on, night would again be night and day would again be day, and you could get nothing for a *duddu*. It became like any other place.

Notes and References



CHAPTER 1: WHERE MIRRORS ARE WINDOWS: TOWARDS AN ANTHOLOGY OF REFLECTIONS

[This essay is reproduced from *History of Religions*, 28.3 (1989): 187–216. As Ramanujan's note of acknowledgement below indicates, he first drafted portions of this essay for a conference paper delivered in Germany in 1985, and developed a fuller version for a lecture at Oxford in May 1988. He prepared the final version for journal publication in mid-1988, shortly before taking up a visiting professorship at the University of Michigan. Gen. Ed.]

This paper is in the form of an anthology of ideas and examples (poems, mostly). They explore what I consider a central presupposition or preoccupation, of my own and my colleagues' work on Indian texts, hence the large number of quotations from my own and others' translations. Parts and versions of this paper were presented at the Conference on the Direction and Limits of Reflexivity in the Axial Age Civilizations, in Bad Homberg, 1985, and as a Radhakrishnan Memorial Lecture in All Souls' College, Oxford University, 1988. I wish to thank my hosts and colleagues in both places.

1. From T.S. Eliot's celebrated essay, 'Tradition and Individual Talent', in Eliot 1951.
2. William Butler Yeats' phrase in 'The Statues', in Yeats 1955.
3. See Ramanujan 1967 and 1985.
4. For examples of such poems, see Ramanujan 1985, 195–211.
5. See Ingalls 1965, 123 and 131; and Bryant 1978, 53–4.
6. See Collingwood 1933, 26–91. Collingwood's phrase is used in an entirely different and philosophic context.
7. John Carman, personal communication with the author, November 1987.
8. Philip Lutgendorf's translation, quoted in O'Flaherty 1984, 108.

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CHAPTER 2: IS THERE AN INDIAN WAY OF THINKING? AN INFORMAL ESSAY

[This essay is reproduced from *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 23.1 (1989): 41–57. Ramanujan originally wrote it as a paper for a 'Workshop on the Hindu Person', sponsored by the Joint Committee on Societies and the Social Science Research Council, and held at the University of Chicago in 1980. The paper circulated in typescript among Ramanujan's students and colleagues throughout the 1980s. It is also included in *India Through Hindu Categories*, ed. McKim Marriott (Delhi, 1989). Gen. Ed.]

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CHAPTER 3: TOWARDS AN ANTHOLOGY OF CITY IMAGES

[This essay was published in *Urban India: Society, Space and Image*, ed. R.G. Fox, monograph no. 10 (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Program in Comparative Studies on Southern Asia, 1971), and is reprinted with corrections from that volume.]

1. *Manu* from the root 'man', 'to think'. The progenitor of mankind, created by Brahmā. (Translator's footnote.)
2. *Rāma-kathā*. The recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. (Translator's footnote.)
3. Māghavan. A title of the Lord Indra, King of the Celestials. (Translator's footnote.)
4. Amarāvati, Lord Indra's Capital. (Translator's footnote.)
5. It is implied that Manu founded the original city on this site, but several cities built by other monarchs succeeded it. (Translator's footnote.)
6. See also Dimock and Inden on the relative lack of city/country opposition in medieval Bengal, though the cultural settings are rather different from Tamilnad.

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CHAPTER 4: FOOD FOR THOUGHT: TOWARDS AN ANTHOLOGY OF HINDU FOOD IMAGES

[This essay grew out of a paper that Ramanujan wrote in late 1984 and presented in January 1985 at the Sixth International Conference on Semiotics and Structural Studies at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, Karnataka. He expanded and revised it for publication in a volume of essays edited by Ravindra Khare. The version here is reproduced from a typescript prepared in 1988. Gen. Ed.]

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CHAPTER 5: LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE TAMIL EXAMPLE

[This essay is reprinted from *Problems of Modernization in South India*, ed. Robert Drake (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Monograph Series, 1968). It is related to other technical papers in linguistics that Ramanujan published in the 1960s, which are not included in this volume; see especially 'The Structure of Variation: A Study in Caste Dialects', in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, ed. Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1968); 'Typology of Density Ranges', *International Journal of American Linguistics* (1966), co-authored with C.F. Voegelin and F.M. Voegelin; and 'Sociolinguistic Variation and Linguistic Change', *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Linguistics* (1963), co-authored with William Bright. Gen. Ed.]

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CHAPTER 6: SOME THOUGHTS ON 'NON-WESTERN' CLASSICS: WITH INDIAN EXAMPLES

[This essay is reproduced from the typescript of a lecture-text initially drafted in 1991. An edited version was published posthumously in *World Literature Today*, 68.2 (1994): 331–4, as the closing piece in a special issue on 'Indian Literatures: In the Fifth Decade of Independence' for which I served as an advisory editor. Gen. Ed.]

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CHAPTER 7: THREE HUNDRED *RĀMĀYAṆAS*: FIVE EXAMPLES AND THREE THOUGHTS ON TRANSLATION

[Ramanujan first wrote this essay as a lecture delivered at the Workshop on South Asia at the University of Chicago in 1985–86. In a revised and expanded form it appeared in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 22–49, from where it is reprinted here. The second section of the essay draws on a short paper on 'The Ahalya Episode in Two Rāmāyaṇas (Valmiki and Kampan)', which Ramanujan presented at the Association for Asian Studies Conference in Boston in 1968. Gen Ed.]

This paper was originally written for the Conference on Comparison of Civilizations at the University of Pittsburgh, February 1987. I am indebted to the organisers of the conference for the opportunity to write and present it and to various colleagues who have commented on it, especially V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Paula Richman.

1. I owe this Hindi folktale to Kirin Narayan of the University of Wisconsin.
2. Several works and collections of essays have appeared over the years on the many *Rāmāyaṇas* of South and South-east Asia. I shall mention here only a few which were directly useful to me: A.K. Banerjee 1983; P. Banerjee 1986; J.L. Brockington 1984; V. Raghavan 1975 and 1980; Sen 1920; C.R. Sharma 1973; and S. Singaravelu 1968.
3. See Bulcke 1950. When I mentioned Bulcke's count of three hundred *Rāmāyaṇas* to a Kannada scholar, he said that he had recently counted over a thousand in Kannada alone; a Telugu scholar also mentioned a thousand in Telugu. Both counts included Rāma stories in various genres. So the title of this paper is not to be taken literally.
4. Through the practice of *tapas*—usually translated 'austerities' or 'penances'—a sage builds up a reserve of spiritual power, often to the point where his potency poses a threat to the gods (notably Indra). Anger or lust, however, immediately negates this power; hence Indra's subsequent claim that by angering Gautama he was doing the gods a favour.
5. The translation in the body of this article contains selected verses from I.9, the section known in Tamil as *akalikaipaṭalam*. The edition I cite is *Kampar Iyaṟṟiya Irāmāyaṇam* (Aṇṇāmalai: Aṇṇāmalai Palikalaikkaḻakam, 1957), Vol. 1.
6. See, for example, the discussion of such views as summarised in Goldman 1984, 15. For a dissenting view, see Pollock 1984.
7. See Desai 1980, 63. In the discussion of the *Ramakirti* to follow, I am indebted to the work of Desai and Singaravelu. For a translation of the Thai Rāmāyaṇa, see Puri and Sarahiran 1949.
8. *Kampar Iyaṟṟiya Irāmāyaṇam*, Vol. 1, selected verses from I.1, in the section known as *nāṭṭuppaṭalam*. My translation.
9. One source for Peirce's semiotic terminology is his 'Logic as Semiotic', in Peirce 1940, 88–119.
10. Personal communication from V. Narayana Rao.
11. I heard the Telugu tale in Hyderabad in July 1988, and I have collected versions in Kannada and Tamil as well. For more examples of tales around the *Rāmāyaṇa*, see Chapter 28, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', below.

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CHAPTER 8: REPETITION IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

[Ramanujan provides a brief genealogy of this essay in the opening note below. The title of the original seminar paper on which it is based was 'Towards a Structural Analysis of the *Mahābhārata*' (unpublished, 1968). The present version, finalised in 1988, appeared in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1991). It probably also draws on a paper entitled 'The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Some Contracts' (unpublished) first presented to an audience at the university of Chicago in 1968. Gen. Ed.]

This essay on the *Mahābhārata* was originally written in 1968 and presented to Victor Turner's Seminar on Comparative Epic at the University of Chicago. I had thought that the paper was suggestive but needed extensive reworking, so I did not venture to publish it. I venture to do so now, twenty years later, urged and encouraged by the responses of *Mahābhārata* scholars like Alf Hiltebeitel, David Shulman, Narayana Rao and Arvind Sharma—to all of whom I'm indebted. I have changed very little in the original paper, except that I've added new references. Other and better scholars have independently anticipated and explored some of the notions expressed in this early essay. Such corroborations are both a pain and a pleasure. I've added several of these references to the essay.

1. See Dumézil 1968, 93; van Buitenen 1978, 15–16; and Shulman 1985, 262, for discussions regarding the opening chapter of the *Gītā* as an inversion of the Uttara episode, of the *Virāṭaparvan* as a 'carnival'.
2. In this passage, as elsewhere, the repeated epithet and names play a crucial role. Arjuna is called Pārtha (son of Pṛthā or Kuntī), Kaunteya (son of Kuntī), Pāṇḍava, son of Pāṇḍu, Bhārata ('descendant of Bharata'), Kaurava, a scion of the Kurus, etc. Each of these epithets highlights and describes an aspect of the hero, often ironically. Several play on the irony of this apparent difference and deeper kinship with Karṇa to whom all the lineage and metronomic names ('Kaunteya') apply as well, though no one present knows it. The irony reaches a climax here when Bhīma taunts Karṇa, laughing at his low birth: 'Son of a *sūta*, you do no have the right to die in a fight with a Pārtha'! I've already commented on Arjuna's recital of his ten names to Uttara in the act of self-revelation. The *Gītā* too uses several names for Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in significant ways: e.g., Paraṃtapa, 'chastiser of foes', reminds him of his duty as a warrior. Each of these epithetic names, here and in the Purāṇas, summarise the history-index the actions and relations of the character. The agent here is a sum of his actions, a point of intersection for multiple relationships. Acts constitute the actor.
3. Four outstanding images recur throughout to describe the war between the cousins: (1) encounter between the gods and demons; (2) a forest of trees felled by some natural calamity; (3) man as a sacrificial beast, the war as a sacrifice, and the end of a battle as the dying sacrificial fire; (4) universal dissolution in the ultimate fire. These images extend the human time-span into mythic time, magnify the significance of the action and its terror. Furthermore each is embodied in some important incident within the action: (1) Kṛṣṇa beheading Śisupāla; (2) the Khāṇḍava forest decimated by a fire, devouring tree, bird and beast; (3) the sacrifices undertaken (the Aśvamedha, the Rājasūya, and the bizarre vengefulness of genocide in the Snake Sacrifice); (4) fires, beginning with the fire-trap set for the Pāṇḍavas, the Khāṇḍava fire mentioned above, and the forest fire in which Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī and Kuntī die, and lastly, the fiery terror of Time in the *Gītā* when Kṛṣṇa is seen as the agent of universal dissolution. I may add that each of these should be seen as a *leitmotiv*, subordinated to the total human action, not as a central overarching theme. Madeleine Biardeau (1987) sees the epic as an extended sacrifice, and Alf Hiltebeitel (1976) sees Kṛṣṇa as a form of 'Śiva, destroyer of all'. While each of these emphases is truly illuminating, their overemphasis seem to me to underrate the architectonic complexity of the *human* action of the epic.
4. Folklore and later *Mahābhāratas* continue these tests and question Draupadī's chastity also. For instance, both the Tamil Bhārata of Villipputtūrār, the Kannada one by Kumāravyāsa, and a Tamil chapbook tell the episode in the *Vanaparva* (third *sandhi*), the Forest Book. In the Kannada *Bhārata*, Draupadī sees a beautiful mango on a tree in a sage's garden and covets it. Bhīma fetches it. The brothers soon learn that it is a fruit grown specially for the sage who wakes up from his *tapas* only once in six months, when he breaks his fast with this single fruit in the garden. To forestall his anger, they wish somehow to restore the fruit to its place in the tree. As only Kṛṣṇa can accomplish such a deed contrary to nature, they summon him. He does arrive and says that the fruit would return to its stalk only if each of the five brothers and Draupadī reveal their deepest desires. The five brothers say nothing surprising or shameful—for instance, Bhīma and Arjuna desire fame and battle, and Yudhiṣṭhira speaks of oneness. With each revelation, the fruit rises magically toward the stalk from which it was plucked. When it is Draupadī's turn, she says that women desire all handsome men, even brother, father and son. But the fruit does not go back to the stalk, and Kṛṣṇa insists that she tell the truth about herself. She then reveals that though she has five husbands, she has six in her heart—a suggestion that she desires Karṇa as well, though she doesn't know that he is the sixth. In the Tamil chapbook, *Pañcavar Varavāsam*, this desire for Karna is made explicit. She says she had seen Karṇa at her bride-choice before Arjuna won her with his feat of archery, had mistaken him for Arjuna and desired him for her husband. Thus, Draupadī the chaste wife is also shown up as having lewd desires. In Kumāravyāsa, she says, 'Women are chaste only when men

are not available.' See the recent essay by Shulman (1989) for further discussion of this episode. I'm indebted to David Shulman for the references to Villipputtūrār and the Tamil chapbook.

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CHAPTER 9: CLASSICS LOST AND FOUND

[This essay is reproduced from *Contemporary India: Essays on the Use of Tradition*, ed. Carla Borden (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 131–46. Gen. Ed.]

1. Reference to Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (1972, 1980).
2. For earlier discussions of this remarkable scholar's work and the 'Tamil Renaissance', see Ramanujan 1970; Zvelebil 1973; Hudson 1981; Ramanujan 1985.
3. *E<u>n</u> Carittiram* ('My History'), abridged by Ki. Va. Jagannatan (Madras: Tyagaraja Vilasam, 1958); for an English translation, see S.K. Guruswamy, *The Story of My Life* (Madras: U.V. Caminataiyar Library, 1980). Denis Hudson (1981) has a very readable translation of the relevant chapter.
4. I was reminded of this myth by V. Narayana Rao.
5. Two older scholars before Aiyar ought to be mentioned: Arumuka Navalar (1822–79) and C.V. Damodaram Pillai (1832–1901),

Clothey, Fred W. 1978. *The Many Faces of Murukan: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God*. The Hague: Mouton.

Emeneau, Murray B. 1971. *Toda Songs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hart, George L. 1980. *Poets of the Tamil Anthologies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hudson, Denis. 1981. Renaissance in the life of Saminata Aiyar, a Tamil scholar. *Comparative Civilizations Review* 7 (Fall).

Kott, Jan. 1964. *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

Ramanujan, A.K. 1967. *The Interior Landscape*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

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Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.

Zvelebil, Kamil V. 1973. *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

CHAPTER 10: FORM IN CLASSICAL TAMIL POETRY

[This essay was first published in *Symposium on Dravidian Civilization*, ed. Andrée F. Sjoberg (Austin, Texas: Jenkins Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 73–106, from where it is reproduced on this occasion. The essay obviously drew on the material Ramanujan had included in *The Interior Landscape* (1967): some fourteen years later it became the basis, in turn, of the Afterword to *Poems of Love and War* (1985). Gen. Ed.]

1. A number of the Eight Anthologies are arranged according to the five types of 'landscape', though *Ku<u>r</u>untokai* is not. For example, *Aiṅku<u>r</u>unū<u>r</u>u* has a hundred poems for each type.
2.

Season	: early frost	—*ku<u>r</u>iñci*	: lovers' union
Bird	: junel hen	—*mullai*	
			: patient waiting
Beast	: deer	—*mullai*	

The combination of lovers' union and patient waiting indicates a mixing of memory and desire.

Burke, Kenneth. 1945. *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
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Perse, St. John. 1966. *Birds*. (Bollingen Series, 82). New York: Macmillan.
Puṟanāṉūṟu, II. 1962. Madras: S.S.S.W. Publishing Society.
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Tolkāppiyam: Poruḷatikāram, Iḷampūraṇam. 1961. Tinnevelly: The South India Siddhantha Works Publishing Society. (Quotations translated by A.K. Ramanujan.)

CHAPTER 11: ON TRANSLATING A TAMIL POEM

[The text of this essay is based on a printed version in Ramanujan's files, for which the source (probably a collection of essays on translation, published in the late 1980s) is identified. The essay apparently developed from an early lecture entitled 'On Translating an Indian Poem', delivered at New York University in 1968. Gen ed.]

This paper uses examples and materials from my other work, especially from *The Interior Landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1967) and *Poems of Love and War* (Columbia University Press, 1985). For further details and a body of translations from classical Tamil poetry, the reader is referred to these books and the Afterwords in these books.

In the translation of Kapilar's poem, 'What She Said', at the beginning of the second section of the paper, the words 'waterholes' and 'animals' could have been in the singular. For, in Tamil, neuter words may omit the plural marker. The word for 'animal' here is *māṉ*, which also means 'a deer'. The grammar of such Tamil words makes them both general and specific, not either the one or the other. In this case, I preferred the generality of the English plurals in my translation, losing the teeter-totter of the Tamil singular/plural.

CHAPTER 12: FROM CLASSICISM TO *BHAKTI*

[This essay, which Ramanujan co-authored with his student and colleague Norman Cutler, first appeared in a collection entitled *Essays on Gupta Culture*, published in the early 1980s. Cutler is currently an Associate Professor of Tamil in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. Gen. Ed.]

1. As Hart has shown, the early Tamil poems contain a wealth of information concerning ancient Tamil conceptions of the sacred (Hart 1975; especially 21–50). But they are not religious poems.
2. For instance, *Tiruppāvai*, a very popular *bhakti* poem by the woman poet Āṇṭāḷ, identifies Kṛṣṇa with a rain-cloud:

   'Kaṇṇaṉ, Storm cloud,
   Don't hide!
   Black as the Era's First One,
   You dive into the ocean;
   You scoop up its waters
   And raise peals of thunder.
   Your lightning flashes
   Like the *cakra* held by Padmanābha,
   The Lord with shoulders renowned for their beauty.
   And you thunder like his conch.
   Send your rains right away
   Like a shower of arrows from the Śārṅga-bow,
   So the world will prosper.
   We too rejoice
   And bathe in *mārkaḻi* month.
   Accept, consider our vow.'

   Tiruppāvai 4 (Cutler 1979)

3. Aḻakar, the name Viṣṇu bears in this temple, means 'the beautiful one'. As Cuntarar, Śiva bears a name with identical meaning in the great Mīnākṣi-Cuntareśvarar temple of Madurai.
4. In these translations from *Paripāṭal* we are indebted to Fracois Gros' French renderings (Gros 1968).
5. Even though they are not canonised, the *Paripāṭal* poems are clearly related to the later *āḻvār* poems. They share the Viṣṇu mythology, the sacred geography, the motifs, the ideas. See Damodaran 1978, 262–7.
6. Zvelebil cites a story from the *Tiruvilaiyatal Purāṇam* 51 (seventeenth century) which makes this point in an amusing manner.

   'The forty-eight poet-academicians in Maturai composed innumerable beautiful poems which, however, were so much alike that those who wanted to comment upon them could not ascribe them to individual poets, unable to recognise any difference (*veṟupāṭu aṟiyātu*) and being much amazed (*viyantu*); not only that, the poets themselves could not recognise their own poems, and were bewildered. It was Śiva-Sundara himself who appeared in their midst in the guise of a poet, sorted out their works, and accepted the chair of the president of the Academy' (Zvelebil 1974, 43).
7. The poets of the *puṟam* poems, like Kapilar or Auvai, often have legendary biographies, like the saints, which are considered explanatory of the poems. See Kapilar's poems on his friend and patron, Pāri. There are fewer examples of this matching of poems with poet's life in the *akam* poems: see index of poets in Ramanujan (1967), especially the note on Atimanti (p. 120).
8. In this poem Poykai speaks of an experience which ended in a revelation. The three early *āḻvārs* did not know one another until Viṣṇu simultaneously induced in each a desire to visit his shrine at Tirukkōvalūr (Kōval). On the

night of his arrival, Poykai sought shelter in the small antechamber of a *ṛṣi*'s *āśrama*. Not much later Pūtam and then Pēy arrived with the same intention, and the three devotees gladly shared the small room though they had to stand to fit inside. As if to add to their discomfort, Viṣṇu enveloped Tirukkōvalūr in a blanket of storm clouds so thick the three saints couldn't even see one another, though they stood only inches apart. Huddled together, the saints began to feel more and more crowded for no apparent reason. Finally, in a flash of insight, they realised that Viṣṇu too had joined them in the tiny room, and they at once were able to see by the light of the lord's grace.

Poykai's invocation of Viṣṇu in the first line alludes to the story in which Kṛṣṇa lifted the mountain Govardhana to protect the cowherds from a downpour sent by the jealous god Indra. The mythological allusion is an ironic complement to the biographical event. In the myth Kṛṣṇa shelters the cowherds from the rain sent by Indra. In the biographical story Viṣṇu inundates Tirukkōvalūr, and his devotees are forced to run for shelter.

9. 'The eight-armed lord' is a reference to Viṣṇu in his form Aṣṭabhujākāra. This poem alludes to the story of Gajendra, the elephant, who was a devotee of Viṣṇu. When Gajendra was gathering lotus blossoms to offer to the god, a crocodile grabbed him by the leg and began to pull him into the pond. Gajendra called to Viṣṇu for help, and the god saved him.

10. When Nāthamuni, the first Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācārya* (tenth century AD), happened to hear a group of Vaiṣṇavite devotees singing a few verses by Nammāḻvār, he was so taken with these hymns that he resolved to learn everything the saint had composed. Unfortunately, at this time there was no one who knew more than the few verses Nāthamuni had heard, but still he remained firm in his resolve. After he recited the hymn of praise for Nammāḻvār, composed by the saint Maturakavi, twelve thousand times, Nammāḻvār came to him in a yogic vision and taught him not only his own compositions, but the hymns of all the other *āḻvārs*. Nāthamuni later arranged these in their canonical form and instituted their recitation in the temple of Śrīraṅgam.

By the estimates of most modern scholars, Nammāḻvār and his disciple Maturakavi were the last of the twelve *āḻvārs*, and they lived sometime during the ninth century AD. However, Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition places Nammāḻvār fifth in the chronology of the *āḻvārs*, after Poykai, Pūtam, Pēy and Tirumaḻicai, and consequently dating of the saint's lifetime has not been unanimous.

11. Two recent works which attend to *akam* elements in Nammāḻvār's poetry are Srinivasa Raghavan (1975) and Damodaran (1978). Zvelebil (1973 and 1974) and Varadarajan (1972) take a longer view of the *akam-bhukti* connections in Tamil literary history. For a more general account of love symbolism in Indian *bhakti*, see Vaudeville (1962).

2. In the classical corpus, the *Kalittokai* anthology (seventh century AD?) has poems on bull-baiting contests. They describe heroic fights with bulls in an *akam* context, as a lover's ordeals before he can win his beloved's hand. Here again *akam* and *puṟam*, love and heroism, meet. These poems probably celebrate an ancient cowherding custom, and resonate in the Kṛṣṇa-Pinnai myths.

13. The stock characters of *akam* poetry include the hero (*talaivaṉ*), the heroine (*talaivi*), the hero's friend (*pāṅkaṉ*), the heroine's girl friend (*tōḻi*), the heroine's mother (*naṟṟāy* or *tāy*) and her foster-mother (*cevili tāy*). In its colophon each *akam* poem is designated *talaivaṉ kūṟṟu* ('the words of the hero'), *talaivi kūṟṟu* ('the words of the heroine'), etc. For further discussion of the narrative structure of *akam* poems, see Ramanujan (1967). There are some verses in Nammāḻvār's *Tiruviruttam* in which the hero is the speaker, but in these the hero is not explicitly identified as Viṣṇu (e.g., *Tiruviruttam* 50).

14. This name is a 'feminization' of Parāṅkuśa, one of the several names by which the saint is known. Parāṅkuśa, which literally means 'he whose goad is held by another' denotes the *āḻvār*'s complete dependence on Viṣṇu.

15. Following their canonization by Nāthamuni in the tenth century AD, the hymns of the *āḻvārs* were treated as sacred literature in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. Side-by-side with the Vedas and other sacred texts in Sanskrit, they were recited in temples and valued as a *pramana* or basis for religious-philosophical discussion. Beginning in the late twelfth century AD, the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* began to write commentaries on the works of the *āḻvārs*, and of all the *āḻvār* texts *Tiruvāymoḻi* received the largest share of attention. The *ācāryas*' commentaries on the *āḻvārs*' poems are sometimes referred to as *anubhavagranthas* or 'works of enjoyment' to signify that these works embody the *ācāryas*' 'enjoyment', e.g., aesthetic and intellectual experience, of the *āḻvārs*' hymns. The *āḻvārs* in turn are revered because they dedicated themselves to 'enjoyment' of the lord. The word *anubhavagrantha* is revealing, for it shows that the *āḻvārs*' hymns are polysemous texts. Each commentary is the record of a meeting between the *āḻvārs*' poems and one especially well-schooled member of the *āḻvārs*' audience. Five commentaries on *Tiruvāymoḻi* have become classics in Śrīvaiṣṇava theological literature, and perhaps the most influential of these is the *Mūppattāyirappaṭi* ('the thirty-six thousand') by the thirteenth-century commentator, Vaṭakkuttiruvītippillai. (The name of the text is derived from the number of *granthas* or metric units it contains.)

16. The author of *Ācārya Hṛdayam* is the son of Vaṭakkuttiruvītipillai (see note 15 above) and brother of Pillai Lokācārya, who is looked upon as the founding father of the Teṅkalai or southern school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. *Ācārya Hṛdayam* ('the *ācārya*'s heart') is not a direct commentary on the verses of *Tiruvāymoḻi*. Instead, the author aims to acquaint his audience with Nammāḻvār's innermost thoughts and feelings.

17. The Sanskrit sectarian texts called *āgamas* are ideally supposed to cover four topics: *caryā*, *kriyā*, *yoga* and *jñāna*. In general *caryā* denotes rules

pertaining to the maintenance of temples; *kriya* pertains to the conduct of ritual and the construction of temples; the *yoga* portion deals with methods of physical and spiritual discipline; and the subject of the *jñāna* portion is religious philosophy. There are two important Vaiṣṇavite āgamic schools: the Vaikhānasa and the Pāñcarātra. The Vaikhānasa is usually considered to be the more conservative of the two, and Rāmānuja's campaign to introduce Pāñcarātra modes of worship into Vaiṣṇavite temples is usually interpreted as a drive to popularise Vaiṣṇavism. The Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* introduced many Pāñcarātra ideas into their writings.

18. The four *vyūhas* or 'emanations' of Viṣṇu are Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. In mythology these are the names of Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa's brother, his son, and his grandson. According to the *vyūha* doctrine, Vāsudeva represents the supreme reality; Saṅkarṣaṇa, primeval matter or *prakṛti*; Pradyumna, cosmic mind or *manas*, and Aniruddha represents cosmic self-consciousness or *ahaṅkāra*. From the latter springs Brahmā, the creator of the phenomenal world. Apparently it is because the *vyūhas* give rise to Brahmā that they are associated with the reclining Viṣṇu who 'gives birth' to the creator-god through his navel.

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Srinivasa Raghavan, A. 1975. *Nammāḻvār*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

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———. 1977. The beginnings of bhakti in south India. *Temenos*. 13: 223–57.

CHAPTER 13: ON WOMEN SAINTS

[The text of this essay is based on the corrected copy, in Ramanujan's files, of the version published in *The Divine Consort*, ed. John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulf (Berkeley: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1982). This essay probably grew out of the unpublished lecture on 'Men, Women, and Saints' that Ramanujan delivered at the Center for World Religions at Harvard University in 1976. A revised text of the latter piece forms the next essay in the present volume; see the main text and the accompanying notes below. Gen. Ed.]

1. 'Masculine' and 'feminine', of course, imply well-known cultural stereotypes: active/passive, instrumental/expressive, public/private, etc. Hence my quotation marks around the words. Part of the intent of this paper is to examine these stereotypes in Hindu culture, and to discern how both males and females conform to, struggle with, contradict, vary or enlarge these stereotypes.

   Freud considers all religions to express a regressive longing for the security of the infantile relation to the parent. For him, as Philip Rielf has said, religion is a 'feminine' preoccupation; religious man, like a woman, is 'forced to obey unconditionally', to be passive, compliant, dependent. See Rielf 1961, 293.

2. Ta.Su.Sāmarāya's *Śivaśaraṇa Kathāratnakośa* (1967), is an encyclopedia in Kannada that summarizes material from more than 200 sources about nearly 1000 Śaiva saints. Of these, about 100 are women. The entries vary in length from a single line to a couple of pages. Most of the saints are not given dates. My materials regarding the following Kannada Vīraśaiva saints' legends come from this source: Tilakavve, Vīrasaṅgavve, Dālāyi, Goggavve, Rēkavve and Vīracōḷādēvi. The life of Mahādevyyakkā has received more elaborate treatment in the works of Harihara and in the *Śūnyasampādane*. I have summarized her life and three others' in my *Speaking of Śiva* (1973). For outlines of other Indian women saints' lives, I have relied on *Women Saints of East and West* (1955). The book contains short articles on the following women saints: Avvaiyār (Tamil, Śaiva), Aṇṭāḷ (Tamil, Vaiṣṇava), Lalla or Lallēśvarī (Kashmiri, Śaiva), Mīra Bāi (Hindi, Vaiṣṇava), Bahiṇbāi (Marathi, Vaiṣṇava), and Gaurībāi (Gujarati, Vaiṣṇava). Well-known works like *Periyapurāṇam* and *Sri Mahabhaktivijayam* (available in Hindi, Marathi, and Tamil versions) should also be mentioned. For the sake of brevity I have used only 15 examples, which I consider representative and structurally typical, in this paper.

   I have looked at these saints' life stories not for the truth of historical fact, but for patterns in what is presented by the narrators.

3. See Buhler (1886) for Manu 9.3. The whole chapter on the duties of husband and wife should be read with the lives of the women saints: rule after rule is broken. See especially 9.13, 21–2, 26–8, 83.
4. For example, the following poem:

   People,
   male and female,
   blush when
   a cloth covering their shame comes loose.
      When the lord of lives
   lives drowned without a face
   in the world, how can you be modest?

   When all the world is the eye of the lord,
   onlooking everywhere, what can you
   cover and conceal? (Ramanujan 1973, 131)
5. From *Śrī Mahābhaktivijayam* (Tamil versions by Kukapriyai, 1958), 100–13. According to one text, Purandharadāsa's name, before conversion, is Raghunātharāv; his wife's name is Lakṣmībāyi. He is a Kannada Vaiṣṇava saint and composer who probably lived in the sixteenth century. Independently, R. Blake Michael (1979) has pointed to a similar pattern in the lives of two Vīraśaiva saints' wives.
6. For a brief life of Allama, see Ramanujan 1973, 143–8.
7. For the distinction between *akam* ('interior, self, household', etc.) and *puṟam* ('exterior, other, public space', etc.), see Ramanujan 1967, 101.
8. See Mead 1949, 119. The theme of male envy of the female, which Mead, Bettelheim and others have studied, is not treated here. See Chapter 14, 'Men, Women, and Saints', below.
9. Such patterns of secure continuity with the mother-figure might be relevant to the fact that in many cultures, including the American and the Indian, the male is the 'marked' category, the female the 'unmarked'. The male, in differentiating himself, cannot take over female clothing, whereas females can don variations of male clothing. Male saints, however, take on female personae (often clothing) and attitudes, because they are in a very special context of great intensity. The lack of security may also account for the wide variety of stances in male saint figures, as if they were casting about for identities. This makes a composite type harder to specify.

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Mead, Margaret. 1949. *Male and Female*. New York: William Morrow.
Michaels, R. Blake, 1979. Kayakave Kailasa. Typescript.
Papanek, H. Purdah: Separate worlds and symbolic shelter. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15(3): 289–325.
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CHAPTER 14: MEN, WOMEN AND SAINTS

[The text of this essay is based on an uncorrected typescript in Ramanujan's files. This typescript is probably a roughly revised and expanded version, produced around the mid-1980s, of the lecture on 'Men, Women, and Saints' that he first delivered at the Center for World Religions at Harvard University in 1976. I have silently corrected obvious typographical errors and systematised the use of capitals, italics and diacritical marks. I have also omitted a number of incomplete or inadequate parenthetical references that I could not identify. Quotations not attributed to translators in the text of the essay are from Ramanujan's own translations; his renderings of the poems by Basavaṇṇa, Mahādevī and Dāsimayyā are quoted from *Speaking of Śiva* (1973). The account of Allama Prabhu's life is reproduced verbatim from the biographical introduction to this poet in *Speaking of Śiva* (the typescript contains a xerox copy of pp. 143–4 of the book). The typescript page immediately following the account of Allama's life indicates that, at this juncture in the original lecture, Ramanujan incorporated the second half of his essay entitled 'On Women Saints', which then led smoothly to the observation regarding the pattern of 'beginning "at first base", being "abased" already' that occurs here. Rather than reproduce the relevant pages from that essay, I have left it to the reader of this volume to make the connection between the two texts. Gen. Ed.]

CHAPTER 15: THE MYTHS OF *BHAKTI*: IMAGES OF ŚIVA IN ŚAIVA POETRY

[Ramanujan wrote the first version of this piece as a paper for a conference on 'The Manifestations of Śiva' held at the University of Pennsylvania in 1981. The essay is reproduced in the form in which it appeared in *Discourses on Śiva*:

Proceedings of a Symposium on the Nature of Religious Imagery, ed. Michael W. Meister (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984). Gen. Ed.]

1. See Pillai 1959 (a concordance for Appar's works); and Gunjāḷa 1973 (a concordance for Basavaṇṇa's works).
2. See Shulman 1980, 314–15. In Tamil Mātṛbhūteśvara is called Tāyumāṉavar, 'he who even became a mother'.
3. For all the Vīraśaiva saints' legends in this paper, I am indebted to Sāmarāya 1967.

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CHAPTER 16: WHY AN ALLAMA POEM IS NOT A RIDDLE: AN ANTHOLOGICAL ESSAY

[The text of this essay is derived from a typescript that Ramanujan designated in his handwriting as a 'rough draft' and dated '1993'. The diction and syntax are very colloquial; the typescript was probably intended as an early version of a lecture-text. The argument, however, is dense, complex, and complete. I have edited the text very lightly, making the use of italics and diacritical marks consistent throughout, standardizing spellings and citations, and occasionally clarifying punctuation and syntax. Like 'Śakuntalā and the Ring of Remembrance', forthcoming in *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of A.K. Ramanujan* (1997), this essay is probably one of the last pieces of criticism that Ramanujan composed. Gen. Ed.]

1. Compare Allama on language:

    No foothold for feeling (*bhāva*),
    words are left behind.
    No space for language, no end to space,
    when the sound of the word
    Guheśwara
    explodes.

    Or more extremely, in *Śūnyasampādane* 2.38 (p. 193)

    words ruin action,
    action ruins words.
    All the dregs of feeling
    vanish, ashamed of themselves.
    Awareness of the lord of caves
    is barren, utterly barren

    And on p. 64:

    you cannot listen to the words
    of traitors to *liṅga*
    who give it names.
    A nameless *guru* in the past,
    a nameless *liṅga* and a nameless disciple—
    not knowing this triple step,
    they are ruined,
    O lord of caves

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CHAPTER 17: VARIETIES OF *BHAKTI*

[This is one of Ramanujan's earlier essays, and probably was written around the time that he completed work on *The Interior Landscape* (1967). The text of the essay is as it was published in *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* (1967). Gen. Ed.]

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CHAPTER 18: ON BHARATI AND HIS PROSE POEMS

[Around 1983–84 Ramanujan completed the typescript of a small book of his translations of Subramania Bharati's prose poems, to which this essay forms the Introduction. Gen. Ed.]

CHAPTER 19: THE CLAY MOTHER-IN-LAW: A SOUTH INDIAN FOLKTALE

[This essay is reproduced from *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 20 (September 1956). Ramanujan wrote and published it while working as a Lecturer in English at Lingaraj College, Belgaum, Maharashtra. Gen. Ed.]

1. This will not seem very strange if we remember that south Indian ladies place all the day's cooking before the household gods first, before they serve it to any mortal. They do not eat anything until their husbands and mothers-in-law have eaten. Here, the Mud Mother-in-law is treated partly as a live mother-in-law, and partly as a household deity; in either capacity, she is entitled to being served first.

CHAPTER 20: SOME FOLKTALES FROM INDIA

[This essay was first published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 19 (June 1956), and is the earliest essay by Ramanujan in the present volume. He wrote it while teaching English at Lingaraj College, Belgaum, Maharashtra. For the Tamil variant called 'The Five Cups' collected by Natesa Sastri, cited by Ramanujan in the third paragraph of this essay, see *The Indian Antiquaty* 16 (July 1887); the tale is reprinted in Phyllis Atkinson, *Best Short Stories of India*. Gen. Ed.]

1. Such hair is very unusual among south Indians, who are black-haired; it is even despised by many. This Golden Hair Motif may be a direct borrowing from the West.
2. 'Hanchi' perhaps is derived from 'hanchu' or 'a clay tile'; here by a process of semantic specialization, it means 'a clay mask'.
3. This belief that women can be enticed with the help of charms, enchanted fruits, etc., is prevalent in all parts of India. There are books of magic and of the arts of love which furnish elaborate recipes for *vaśikarana* or conquest.

CHAPTER 21: HANCHI: A KANNADA CINDERELLA

[Ramanujan first published this essay, which draws on field-work done in India in 1955, in *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 259–73. The published version grew out of a lecture entitled 'Three Cinderellas', which examined Cinderella stories in French, German and the Dravidian languages; Ramanujan delivered the lecture to a study-group at the Center for Psychosocial Studies, Chicago, in 1981. Gen. Ed.]

1. For a revised translation of 'The Story of Hanchi' see Ramanujan 1982.
2. Presently available reports allow us to call this a possible Indian oikotype; of course, absence of data is no conclusive argument.
3. If we read the table across, we get paradigms *à la* Lévi-Strauss; if we read down we get a syntagm *à la* Propp. The actual story, of course, goes on from Move 1 to Move 2—like two sentences conjoined in a compound one, with parallelism as a theoretical device. The rather exact repetitions are enriched and artfully disguised from the listener by the various details of Type 896: the three attempts at love-magic, the slander and the rejection of the heroine, the maiden in the box, the substitution of a mad dog for the young woman, etc.
4. Other Cinderella tales (e.g., Grimm's) repeat other episodes thrice, e.g., the prince's ball.
5. Both Jung's archetypes and Lévi-Strauss's ratios tend to be self-evidently 'meaningful'; often they are the 'signified' for other surface 'signifiers'. This is one of the points where the early Chomskyan model of 'deep structures mapped onto surface structures' will not do for cultural or literary analysis.
6. Hanchi's mask can also be seen as a hymen, broken by the groom—not unlike the shattering of a mirror or glass in Jewish and other wedding rituals.
7. See Basham 1954, 435–40, for a short summary.
8. A well-known motif, Polycrates' ring, H. 94.2. Some Cinderella stories do have a ring, instead of a slipper that identified the heroine. For an example, see 'Cap O'Rushes' in Briggs 1970.
9. Like the grammar and lexicon of a language, the type-structure and motific detail inhabit continuous, interacting fields of meaning. Their relations are not merely those of empty (structural) slots which are filled by (lexical) members, or of surface structures that get all their 'sense' from participating in Platonic 'deep structures'. As we have seen, structure at each level of abstraction can signify; meanings are not archetypal, universal, do not inhere in them; they require cultural assignment. Similarly, and more obviously, the motifs so usefully collated by the indexes, need interpretation, both from structure and culture. Motifs, defined as traits with an independent history, would give us a lexicon without a language.
10. At the end of the series, the Cinderella cycle passes into the Animal Groom

cycle. For a bibliography of the variants on this tale-type, see Aarne and Thompson (1961), under 510B.

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CHAPTER 22: THE INDIAN OEDIPUS

[Ramanujan published an early version of this essay, or an essay with the same title, in *Seminar on Indian Literature* (Simla, 1971). A decade later he expanded and rewrote the essay for *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. Lowell Edmunds and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland, 1983), pp. 234–49. The present version reproduces the text of the latter, with the minor changes and corrections that Ramanujan had marked on his file copy. Gen. Ed.]

1. This paper is a revised and enlarged version of an earlier paper (1971). I have retained most of the examples, added counter-instances, and expanded the discussion further in the light of others' responses (e.g., Goldman 1978) and significant earlier papers (e.g. Devereux 1953) I discovered since 1972. The tale-types and motif-numbers are from the well-known indexes by Stith Thompson and his colleagues.

2. The notion of a child's 'life-script' written by a mother should be interesting to psychotherapists, especially of the Bernean persuasion. Resistance to a parent's injunction or suggestion and fulfilling it willy-nilly, as if under hypnosis, follows well-known patterns of compulsive behaviour. There are also tales of 'outwitting Fate', about finding creative solutions by wisely using the very conditions laid down by Fate. For instance, it is written that a girl is fated to earn her living each night by selling her sexual favours. She is advised by a clever friend to ask for a bushel of pearls as payment for each night, so that no one but a divine being (Brahmā Himself, who wrote her destiny) can be her lover; she is also advised to give it all away in charity the next day so that she ensures both her own *puṇya* (cumulative merit) and the certainty of the nightly visit by her divine lover (Śāstri 1968; also found in Kannada: Type 936).

   In contrast to the stories where a parent writes an adverse fate for his child, one should also examine the many stories of a father or *guru* giving his son three or more precepts in Type 910. The percepts will be useful to him in crisis situations like his wedding night or when he is lost in strange places or chosen to be king or in the hour of danger. For instance, Type 910H-J, Never Travel Without a Companion, Stay Awake, Never Plant a Moon Tree, seem to be special to India. Many of the parental percepts save the hero's life, especially on his wedding night. In these stories the bride has poisonous snakes which issue from her nostrils; in one, his companion, a crab, kills them; in another, he remembers and follows his father's percept to stay awake and so is able to kill the snakes and make his bride safe to live with. The Freudian gloss on the dangers of the 'first night' is obvious.
3. Folklore, here and elsewhere, uses common, uncensored, childhood beliefs. (The child) 'first supposes that children are made by mixing some special thing with the food taken; nor does he know that only women can have children. Later he learns of this limitation and gives up the idea of children being made by food, though it is retained in fairy-tales' (Freud 1920, 279).

   For the confusion of sexual and alimentary channels, consider the American hospital joke about the nurse who swallowed a razor blade, and three doctors were circumcised as a result.
4. For Western examples of the incest-riddle lullaby, see Brewster 1972.
5. All these complex attitudes are explicit in this passage from the *Yogattatva Upaniśad* (quoted by Kakar 1978, 95):

   That breast from which one sucked before he now presses and obtains pleasures. He enjoys the same genital organs from which he was born before. She was once his mother, will now be his wife, and she who is now wife, mother. He who is now father will be again son, and he who is now son will be again father.

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CHAPTER 23: THE PRINCE WHO MARRIED HIS OWN LEFT HALF

[Ramanujan wrote this essay specially for *Aspects of India: Essay in Honor of Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr.*, ed. Margaret Case and N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar for American Institute of Indian Studies, 1986), pp. 1–15. It draws on material that Ramanujan was collecting, transcribing and translating in the 1970s and 1980s for *Folktales from India* (1991). Gen. Ed.]

1. I 've heard that such a tale has been reported from Newari in Nepal also (Robert Levy, personal communication), but I have not been able to trace it. If it is also told in Newari, thousands of miles away from Karnataka, the tale has a wider Indian distribution than our present collections lead us to suspect.
2. It is important to remember that, as an independent tale, 516A has all these motifs (the princess, old woman, flowers, sign-language), but their meanings are changed. Different aspects are picked out and highlighted by the presence in our tale of a princess born of flowers and a prince who distrusts women, who cannot read signs. Motifs and incidents do not have fixed, 'archtypal' meanings; they are interpreted by the presence of other motifs in context. When one tale incorporates another, we have to read the whole tale anew, see the parts in relation to the new design they make.
3. In formulating this thought, I'm indebted to a conversation with V. Narayana Rao.
4. At this time, I've shied away from the relevant psychoanalytic literature on narcissism, beginning with Freud's famous essay (1914). Hamilton (1982) has a useful bibliography and a detailed critical discussion, especially regarding early childhood development. I've also refrained from going into the contrasts between the self-love of our hero and that of the Greek Narcissus.

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CHAPTER 24: A FLOWERING TREE: A WOMAN'S TALE

[This essay is reproduced from a draft typescript found among Ramanujan's papers. The essay is part of a project that he worked on during the late 1980s and early 1990s, tentatively entitled in a book-length manuscript as *A Flowering Tale and Other Oral Tales from the Kannada.* The manuscript is currently being edited for publication by Stuart Blackburn. Ramanujan's typescript for the essay carries minimal annotations for corrections and changes; the notes and references printed below are as provided in the copy-text, where they remained rough and incomplete. Gen. Ed.]

1. See A.K. Ramanujan, 'Towards a Counter-System: Women's Tales'; Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations.*
2. This essay is part of a series which may be called 'Women's Tales: They Tell a Different Story'. See my 'Telling Tales'; 'Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales'; 'On Folk Mythologies and Folk Puranas'; 'On Women Saints'; 'Hanchi: A Kannada Cinderella'. As suggested in these papers, different kinds of women's materials are relevant in constructing proverbs and riddles used by women, women-saints' lives and poems, tales and *vratakathās* told by women in women-only contexts, wedding songs, retellings of myths and epics by women, and so on. Folktales are part of this 'female tradition' yet to be explored and seen as a whole in relation to other parts of the culture. The folktale universe (both men's and women's tales) itself is in a dialogic relation to the more official mythologies of the culture; see my 'Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales'.
3. From A.K. Ramanujan's field notes; versions published earlier in Beck et al., *Folktales of India* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), and in Ramanujan, *Folktales from India* (New York: Pantheon, 1991).
4. A.K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 33.
5. A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 55.
6. In women's tales, the true antagonist as well as the helper for a woman is another woman, just as in the men's tales the hero battles always with an older male, a father-figure, often with brothers. Stepmothers, stepsisters, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, rival women who usurp the heroine's place abound in these tales. In the tale of the Lampstand Woman, even Fate is Mother Fate. (In a man's tale, Outwitting Fate, Fate is Brahmā, a male.) Men in these tales are usually wimps, under the thumbs of their mothers or wives; mostly they are absent. Sometimes they are even dead, waiting to be revived

by their wives' ministrations. Mother-in-law tales in south India have no fathers-in-law. The wife and the mother share a single male figure (who is both son and husband); the older and younger woman are rivals for power over him. In other tales, where the central figure is an active heroine, she may battle with a man, usually a husband—sometimes she has to rescue him from his scrapes, often bondage to another woman. In a tale called A Wager (an Indian oral tale, found also in the eleventh-century *Kathāsaritsāgara*; it is also the story of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, which he gets from Italian novella-writers, who probably got it from India), she talks back or outriddles an arrogant spoilt prince who vows that he would punish her for out-talking him: he vows that he would marry her and abandon her. She makes a wager with him that she would beget a son by him and get the son to capture the father and bring him to her. She wins the wager by disguising herself as an acrobat dancer, sleeps with him and gets herself with child by him. Through her son who is expert in all the arts, including banditry, she triumphs over her husband who is now the king. Her son outwits all the father-figures in the realm, especially the police chief and the king. He finally captures the king, his father in a humiliating laundry sack, smothered in the dirty linen of the whole town, and delivers him bound hand and foot to his mother. Father and mother are reunited, if this may be called, reunion. The central bond in this case is between mother and son, not between husband and wife, who are really in conflict. In a number of tales with active heroines, as in The Peasant's Clever Daughter, she answers every riddle that the king sets, and wins by outwitting his plans to seduce her—she has the full power of speech and uses it to her and her family's, often to the whole kingdom's, advantage.

7. I'm indebted to Sudhir Kakar for this formulation.
8. In other tales there are other ways of being an agent in her own behalf: for instance, in tales of abandoned wives who have to travel, often to rescue their own dastardly husbands, they travel in male disguise—as women writers like George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte often wrote under male pseudonyms. In some tales, they are not safe with their brothers or fathers who have incestuous designs on them—though the folktale universe, as it explores many different emotions and attitudes to the same situation, also presents protective brothers, though rarely protective fathers.
9. Bottigheimer 1987, 51. For an extensive bibliography on the subject, see *Language, Gender, and Society*, ed. Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983.
10. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 59–60.
11. Bottigheimer, quoting the Grimms' own dictionary, p. 55.

[The following is only a partial listing, as found in Ramanujan's typescript, of the authors and works to which the text and notes of the essay refer. Gen. Ed.]

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CHAPTER 25: TOWARDS A COUNTER-SYSTEM: WOMEN'S TALES

[This essay is reproduced from *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Frank Korom and Margaret Mills (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 33–55. Gen. Ed.]

1. For some of these materials, see Ramanujan 1985, 1986, 1988, 1989a, 1989b.
2. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, James Strachey's translation; see, e.g., the 1976 edition (New York: Basic Books).

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1. This chapter elaborates on suggestions I have made elsewhere, particularly in Ramanujan 1989. All the translations of tales given here are mine. For more Indian folktales and tales about tales, see Ramanujan 1992. Unless otherwise noted, the tales here are quoted from that book and are reprinted with permission.
   . I am indebted to Philip Oldenburg for these figures, which he computed from recent census reports. According to him the figures are approximate and require various qualifications.
2. Three-quarters of India's population of 844 million live in villages, according to the *New York Times*, April 16, 1992, p. A4.
3. See Rao 1991.
4. For details see Lutgendorf 1991.
5. I am indebted to V. Narayana Rao for help with the translation of the Telugu tales.
6. See Ramanujan 1981, 163.
7. I am indebted to David Shulman's unpublished paper on the Kamban legend for this reference and discussion. For the currency of this legend among Malayalam folk puppeteers, see Blackburn 1987.
8. See Bateson 1980, 14.

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CHAPTER 28: TWO REALMS OF KANNADA FOLKLORE

[This essay was first published in *Another Harmony: New Essays in South Asian Folklore*, ed. Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and is reproduced essentially as it appeared there. Gen. Ed.]

Some of the ideas and examples in this essay were first presented in conference papers (Ramanujan 1979, 1980). Examples are from my fieldwork in the Kannada area, unless otherwise noted; all the translations are mine except where noted.

1. The years five and six, in Piaget's stages of cognitive development, are the age when children learn to use logical operations. Riddles may continue to be used in Indian adult life, but only on special occasions, like weddings, riddle contests, etc. The contrasts (and complementarities) between riddle and proverb are manifold. Here, only one is chosen as an illustration.
2. I am indebted to J. S. Paramashivaiah's vivid description (1971, 27–45) of a performance. Hiriyaṇṇa (1980) has a full transcription of a rendition of the narrative by another professional group, the Tambūri Dāsayyas.
3. According to Burrow and Emeneau 1961, these two words are in all the South Dravidian Languages, and in Tulu and Telugu.
4. See Jakobson 1960, 353.
5. This does not mean that the dialectal domestic telling has no style of its own. There is no speech without style, and no telling without special features. Even in the few sentences I have translated, one sees them: e.g., the traditional description of riches, 'he used to eat from a golden plate, drink from a silver pitcher', with its parallelisms. See Wadley for a stylistic analysis of a short domestic ritual tale.
6. Aristotle describes three Greek genres in his *Poetics* (48a19): 'In fact it is possible to imitate in the same media, and the same objects, (1) by narrating at times (and then again bringing on some dramatic character) [or, becoming something different], the way Homer composes, or (2) with the same person doing the imitating throughout, with no change, or (3) with all the imitators doing their work in and through action' (Else 1957, 90). Here, (2) represents narrative by a single teller, (1) a narrator alternating with a character or choral character, (3) a dramatic mode without a teller. One may see an evolution of forms in this order, from tale to theatre, toward increasing 'objectification' (Else's term), as Aristotle himself does (49a15): 'Aeschylus first raised the company of "actors" from one to two and diminished the choral odes and gave the dialogue the leading role [and Sophocles three (actors) and scene-painting]' (164). Aristotle and Greek drama came alive for me. One can see all three stages, moving from one actor to two and three or more, synchronically, in a Kannada village today. Aristotle's discussion of these and the accompanying changes in diction, verse, 'episodes' and 'extras' is very suggestive for our study of Indian genres.
7. If we add movies which use folk narratives and songs, we get an even greater complexity of techniques, and a wider public audience.

8. Since writing this, I was introduced to the work of Pierre Bourdieu on Africa. He makes a similar domestic/public distinction with deep implications for social, temporal and other kinds of organisation (Bourdieu 1977, especially chapter 2, 'Structures and Habitus'). I am indebted to Paul Riesman for this reference.
9. These names in the folktale, never mentioned again, are obviously borrowed from the legend of Basavaṇṇa, whose parents are Mādirāja and Mādalāmbike. The teller is a Vīraśaiva and would know the names.
10. See Cidanandamurthi 1970, 141–3.
11. Since I wrote this Norman Cutler has pointed out that the Tamil Vaiṣṇava saints, the Āḻvārs, spoke of god as *akattaṉaṉ* and *puṟattaṉaṉ*: 'one who is inside, in *akam*', and 'one who is outside, in *puṟam*'.
12. Robert Bly (1973) uses 'Good Mother', 'Death Mother', 'Tooth Mother'.
13. Told by Ms. Sarvamaṅgaḷā, after her grandmother's version, Mysore, 1977; see Whitehead 1921, 117–19, for a variant.
14. On the subject of untouchables' magic powers, see Hart 1975, 134.
15. For a discussion of Muttuppaṭṭaṉ, see Blackburn 1981.
16. In Indian village, at dawn, people answer calls of nature in the open fields: so the sun would see bare bottoms.
17. See Rajasekhara 1980, 145.
18. ——— 1980, 582.
19. ——— 1980, 270–1.
20. Dimock et al. 1974, 129.
21. For *villuppāṭṭu*, see Blackburn 1981; for *pāḍdana*, see Claus 1975 and 1979.
22. Leavitt 1979; he cites Gaborieau (1975), who gives an excellent description of the trance ritual.
23. This is Leavitt's (1979) translation.

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CHAPTER 29: ON FOLK MYTHOLOGIES AND FOLK PURĀṆAS

[This essay is reproduced from *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 101–20. Gen. Ed.]

1. See Shulman 1980.
2. See Cāminātaiyar 1982.
3. See Rājaśekhara 1973.
4. See Ramanujan 1986.
5. See Barthes 1981, 39.
6. See Ramanujan 1991.
7. In these characterisations, I'm indebted to the researches of Jī. Sam. Paramaśivayya (especially 1979) and P.K. Rājaśēkhara (1980).

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CHAPTER 30: WHO NEEDS FOLKLORE?

[Ramanujan wrote this essay as the First Rama Watumull Distinguished Lecture on India and delivered it at the University of Hawaii on 3 March 1988. The lecture was published under the present title from Honolulu in 1990, as the first paper in the University of Hawaii's South Asia Occasional Paper Series, and its text is reproduced here without change. Gen. Ed.]

1. In this lecture, I rework many of the ideas in my recent papers towards a coherent point of view about Indian folklore.
2. I have said little about Indian oral tales, though I end this paper with an example. See Beck (1987) for a recent, wide selection with anthropological notes, and Narayan (1989) for a fresh contextual study of tales in religious teaching.
3. This tale, reproduced here in translation from my forthcoming book of Kannada folktales, is also told in many other regions and languages of India. The Stith Thompson index of international tale types (1961) identifies it as 1534 An Innocent Man Chosen to Fit the Stake. This tale has so far been recorded only for India, and twenty-one variants have been recorded in Kashmiri, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Garhwali, and so on.

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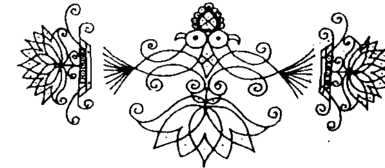
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Chronology of Select Books and Essays by A.K. Ramanujan



1955
- a. Publication of *Proverbs*, a collection of proverbs in Kannada.
- b. Fieldwork on folktales and proverbs; drafts of 'Some Folktales from India' and 'The Clay Mother-in-Law'.

1956
- a. June: Publication of 'Some Folktales from India' in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*.
- b. September: Publication of 'The Clay Mother-in-Law' in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*.

1966
- a. Publication of *The Striders*, book of poems in English.
- b. Publication of *Haladi Meenu*, Ramanujan's Kannada translation of an English novel.

1967
- a. Publication of *The Interior Landscape*, a book of translations of classical Tamil poems.
- b. Publication of 'Varieties of *Bhakti*' in *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*.

1968
- a. Publication of 'Language and Social Change' in *Problems of Modernization in South India*, ed. Robert Drake.
- b. Paper on 'The Ahalya Episode in Two Rāmāyaṇas (Valmiki and Kampan)' presented at Association for Asian Studies Conference, Boston, which was incorporated in 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*' in 1985–91.
- c. Paper entitled 'Towards a Structural Analysis of the *Mahābhārata*' presented at Victor Turner's seminar, University of Chicago; incorporated in 'Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*' in 1988–91.
- d. Paper on 'The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Some Contrasts' delivered at the University of Chicago; probably incorporated in 'Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*' in 1988–91.

e. Paper entitled 'On Translating an Indian Poem' delivered as a lecture at New York University; incorporated in 'On Translating a Tamil Poem' in mid-to-late 1980s.

1969 a. Publication of *Hokkulalli Hūvilla*, a book of Kannada poems.

1970 a. Publication of 'Towards an Anthology of City Images' in *Urban India: Society, Space and Image*, ed. R.G. Fox.

1971 a. Publication of *Relations*, a book of poems in English.
b. Publication of 'Form in Classical Tamil Poetry' in *Symposium on Dravidian Civilization*, ed. Andrée F. Sjoberg.
c. Publication of first version of 'The Indian Oedipus' in *Seminar on Indian Literature*, ed. A. Potdar; revised and expanded for re-publication under the same title in 1983.

1973 a. Publication of *Speaking of Śiva*, a book of translations of Kannada *bhakti* poems.

1974 a. Publication of *The Literatures of India*, co-authored with Edward C. Dimock, Jr., and others.

1976 a. Publication of *Selected Poems* in English.
b. Publication of translation of *Samskara*, a contemporary Kannada novel by U.R. Anantha Murthy.
c. Lecture on 'Men, Women and Saints' delivered at Harvard University; incorporated in both 'On Women Saints', published in 1982, and 'Men, Women and Saints' (unpublished).

1977 a. Publication of *Mattu Itara Padyagalu*, a book of Kannada poems.

1978 a. Publication of *Mattobbana Atmakate*, a Kannada novella.

1979 a. Draft of 'Tale and Teller in South India', delivered as a paper at the Sixth Meeting of the International Association for the Study of Folk-narratives, Edinburgh; incorporated later in 'Telling Tales' in 1989 and 'Tell It to the Walls' in 1992.

1980 a. Draft of 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?' as a paper for a 'Workshop on the Hindu Person', University of Chicago.

1981 a. Publication of *Hymns for the Drowning*, a book of translations of Tamil *bhakti* poems.
b. July: Revised version of 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?'; typescript in circulation.
c. Paper on 'The Myths of *Bhakti*' delivered at a conference on 'The Manifestations of Śiva', University of Pennsylvania.
d. Paper on 'Three Cinderellas' delivered as a lecture at the Center for Psychosocial Studies, Chicago; incorporated in 'Hanchi: A Kannada Cinderella' in 1982.

1982 a. Publication of 'On Women Saints' in *The Divine Consort*, ed. John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulf.
b. Publication of 'Hanchi: A Kannada Cinderella' in *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes.

1983 a. Draft of 'Bharati and His Prose Poems' (unpublished).
b. Publication of the second (revised and expanded) version of 'The Indian Oedipus' in *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes and Lowell Edmunds.

1984 a. Publication of 'The Myths of *Bhakti*' in *Discourses on Śiva*, ed. Michael W. Meister.
b. Draft of portions of 'Food for Thought' presented as a paper at the Sixth International Conference on Semiotics and Structural Studies, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore.

1985 a. Publication of *Poems of Love and War*, a book of translations of classical Tamil poems.
b. Drafts of some portions of 'Where Mirrors Are Windows'.
c. Drafts of 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*'; delivered as a lecture at the Workshop on South Asia, University of Chicago.

1986. a. Publication of *Second Sight*, a book of poems in English.
b. Publication of *Another Harmony*, a book of essays on folklore co-edited with Stuart Blackburn.
c. Publication of 'The Prince Who Married His Own Left Half' in *Aspects of India: Essays in Honor of Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr.*, ed. Margaret Case and N. Gerald Barrier.

1988 a. Revised version of 'Food for Thought' for a book edited by Ravinder Khare.
b. Revised version of 'Where Mirrors Are Windows', delivered in May as a lecture at All Souls' College, Oxford University.
c. Publication of 'Classics Lost and Found' in *Contemporary India: Essays on the Use of Tradition*, ed. Carla Borden.
d. Draft of 'Who Needs Folklore?'; delivered in March as the First Rama Watumull Distinguished Lecture on India, University of Hawaii.

1989 a. February: Publication of 'Where Mirrors Are Windows' in *History of Religions*.
b. Publication of 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*; and in *India through Hindu Categories*, ed. McKim Marriott.

1990 a. Publication of *Kuntobille*, a book of Kannada poems.
b. Publication of 'Who Needs Folklore?' in South Asia Occasional Paper Series, University of Hawaii.

1991 a. Publication of *Folktales from India*, a book of folktales retold and translated from twenty-two Indian languages.

b. Draft of 'Some Thoughts on "Non-Western" Classics' (published posthumously).

c. Publication of 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*' in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman.

d. Publication of 'Towards a Counter-System: Women's Tales' in *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Frank Korom, and Margaret Mills.

1993 a. Draft of 'Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle' (unpublished).

b. Publication of 'On Folk Mythologies and Folk Puranas' in *Purana Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger.

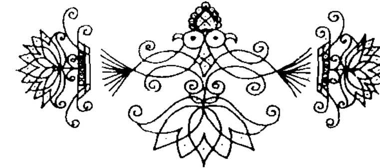
1994 a. Posthumous publication of *When God Is a Customer*, a book of Telugu *bhakti* poems translated with V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman.

b. Posthumous publication of 'Some Thoughts on "Non-Western" Classics' in *World Literature Today*.

c. Posthumous publication of *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*, co-edited with Vinay Dharwadker.

1995 a. Publication of *Collected Poems* in English, including *The Black Hen* (posthumous collection of last poems).

Contributors



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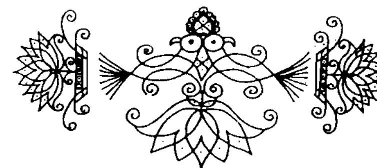
an essay. For this volume, she has written the introduction to Section I, 'General Essays on Literature and Culture'.

Alan Dundes is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Among other contributions to folklore studies, he has edited *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook* (1982) and co-edited *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook* (1983), which contain essays by A.K. Ramanujan. With Stuart Blackburn, he has selected and arranged the materials for and written the introduction to Section IV, 'Essays on Folklore', in this volume.

Krishna Ramanujan currently lives and works in San Francisco. He has co-authored, with Edward C. Dimock, one of the tributes to A.K. Ramanujan that form the general introduction to this volume.

Milton B. Singer was Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, and Paul Klapper Professor Emeritus, Social Science Collegiate Division, at the University of Chicago until his death in December 1994. He has contributed one of the tributes to A.K. Ramanujan in the general introduction to this volume.

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